

THUNDER OVER AFRICA

What this story is about:

As the brig *Elizabeth* approached the coast of Africa John Ross, sixteen-year-old apprentice, was not looking forward to the prospect of spending a whole year at Port Natal with Shackford, a harsh man who had been appointed Secretary of the settlement, as his master. But once ashore the situation began to alter. Fever struck the settlement, and Shackford ordered John, accompanied by his friend Duma, a fine upstanding Zulu, to make the hazardous trek across country to procure medicines from a Portuguese settlement.

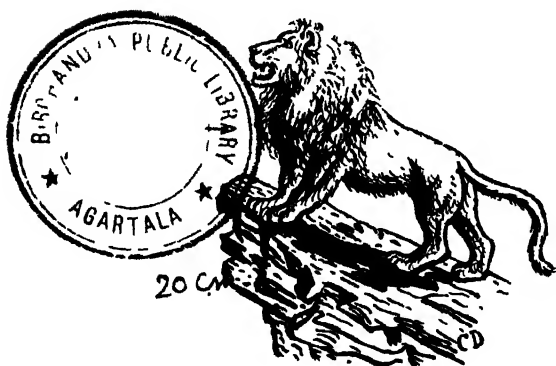
Africa in 1824 was a cruel and primitive country where only the fittest survived. John and Duma suffered many severe hardships and narrowly escaped with their lives, but they returned to settle a final score with their greatest enemy . . .



John sniffed hungrily as he cleaned his rifle

THUNDER OVER AFRICA

by
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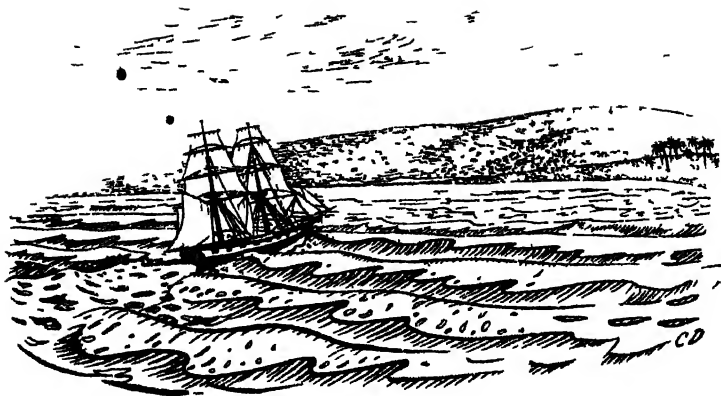
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CHAPTER ONE

The Secretary

THE brig *Elizabeth* rolled heavily as she pushed her two hundred tons into the Indian Ocean swell. Her holds, packed with supplies for the settlers at Port Natal, made her sluggish through the water.

The green bluff of Natal lay like some sleeping beast to port, and the sun set up a heat haze that merged its long summit with the sky.

Behind that bluff was Africa. Africa the unexplored. Africa peopled with savage tribes and teeming with ferocious animals. Africa, primitive, forbidding, was waiting . . .

Perched high on the foretop, John Ross, sixteen-year-old apprentice, started as a strip of brilliant white beach slowly uncoiled behind the surf. Yes, there were

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huts, some little figures running, a thin column of smoke.

He cupped his hands, and yelled:

"Quarterdeck, sir! Settlement in sight!"

The mate's silver speaking trumpet flashed as he lifted it.

"Lay below!"

John felt the backstay burn his hands all the way to the deck. Then he was running aft, saluting the Captain and taking his station beside the man at the wheel.

He noticed that the Captain, Lieutenant King, was wearing his best blue uniform and cocked hat. The sunlight sparkled on his bullion buttons, and his blue-clad body looked lean and hard against the snowy deck.

John stiffened as the Captain caught his eye.

"'Morning Ross."

"Good morning, sir."

"What d'you think of your new home?" The Captain nodded across the water to the settlement.

John felt his stomach tighten. "It—it looks very small, sir."

"I'll be sorry to lose you, Ross. Even though its only for a year. After all, you're young yet and the experience should be good for you . . ."

John listened and watched the Captain's face. King spoke precisely, his voice clipped.

The situation was clear. Apart from her stores, the *Elizabeth* was giving passage to the new Secretary of the settlement, a man named Shackford.

But, two days out from Capetown, Shackford had fallen and broken his arm. Robbed of the power to

The Secretary

write he had asked for someone to be left at the settlement. Someone who could take dictation. John narrowed his eyes.

The Captain had chosen him. When the *Elizabeth* sailed he would be left with Shackford for a year. A year's sea experience missed! A whole year wasted!

"I've noticed that you and Shackford don't like each other, Ross." The Captain's voice dropped a fraction. "But do the job well. The year will go quickly."

John touched his hat. "Aye aye, sir. I'll do my best, sir."

As King moved off towards Leverton, the Mate, John looked bitterly at the settlement. The Captain, he thought, had put it mildly. Shackford hated him ever since that incident at the Cape when they were loading the Secretary's personal gear.

Shackford had spared no expense in equipping himself for his stay. Apart from his trunks, he also had five long black boxes containing his scientific equipment. He had told the Captain that he was a keen naturalist.

A seaman had nearly dropped one of these boxes. Mouthing oaths, Shackford had swiftly raised his cane when John had caught his arm, sharply, saying, "Ship's punishment is given by the bos'un on the Captain's orders. If you've a complaint about this man, report him to the first lieutenant."

An angry exchange of words followed, but John had stood his ground firmly. Shackford's attitude might have suited Captain Bligh, but this was 1824, the ship was the *Elizabeth* and the captain was Lieutenant King.

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John gritted his teeth when he recollected the hatred in Shackford's eyes. But he had been in the right and the Secretary knew it and hated him for it. A year with that man on this settlement would be worse than a lifetime in Newgate Jail.

"Let go!"

John jerked back his thoughts as the anchor splashed and the ship's company snapped into action. Sails were clewed, guns secured and the longboat swung out. King, Leverton and Shackford went aboard. John followed them and made his way to an empty thwart as the boat's crew settled down to a steady stroke.

Shackford sat aft with King, his hands moving as he spoke. John felt his lip curl as he watched. In a month the *Elizabeth* would have finished her refit. She would sail and leave him in this strange land—with that fat sloth for a master!

The boat grounded on the sandy beach to a little cheer from the assembled settlers. These men looked like a gathering of Robinson Crusoes. All wore beards and some were clad in cotton shirts and breeches while others simply wore dressed skins.

Their leader introduced himself as Fynn and led King, Shackford and Mr. Leverton to a hut. John watched them go, his heart dropping.

The sand was gritty and blazing hot under a sun which beat down on the scattered dwellings of the settlers—mere huts of branches daubed with clay. John clenched his fists helplessly as he looked past the huts to where the dank jungle loomed, green, wet and threatening.

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Then he turned and began to help offload the long-boat. The Captain had ordered everything out of the *Elizabeth* by nightfall and both crew and settlers worked like Trojans at the supplies. The last load comprised gunpowder, and John's arms ached as he ploughed over the soft sand to the powder stored on the beach.

He heard an old settler address him as he lowered the keg into place.

"What's your name, lad?"

"John Ross."

"Then you're the fellow who's being left to write for the Secretary?"

"Yes."

"I'm Michael Somers."

As John reached out and shook the old man's gnarled brown hand he saw two blue eyes quizzing him under bushy eyebrows.

"That's a strong grip you've got there, John. A sailor's grip, eh?" The old man chuckled. "How long have you been at sea?"

"Nigh on four years."

"Started as a powder monkey, I'll bet."

"Yes, I did," replied John as they walked back to the boat.

"Can you shoot a musket?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. Pistols, yes."

"You'll have to learn if you're staying. The snakes alone make it important out here. Teach you myself if you like. What do you say?"

John felt his heart suddenly warm to the old man at

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his side. He answered the old settler quickly. "I'd like that very much."

"Right. I'll talk to your skipper."

John felt Somers's hand grip his shoulder. "You'll find all this a bit strange at first. But you'll get to like it."

John nodded silently.

That evening Somers said he had spoken to Lieutenant King who had agreed to the musketry lessons.

"We are to have the afternoons. You can help Shackford in the mornings and evenings."

John looked up at Somers. "That's good news, Mr. Somers. But didn't Mr. Shackford say anything?"

"No," laughed Somers. "He was too busy talking to our Portuguese."

"*Portuguese?*"

"Yes. That's him over there with Shackford now. The fellow with a black beard."

John eyed Shackford's companion. The Portuguese was tall, magnificently built, and wore breeches and boots. He was burnt by the sun and looked as hard as nails. John tore his eyes from the two men on the beach as Somers said:

"Here, let's have a look at your hut. It's almost sundown and you'll want something to eat. I'm hungry, too."

Somers turned and spoke in a foreign tongue to a tall black man who padded away along the beach.

"Is he a Zulu?" asked John as they walked to his hut.

"Yes, lad. That's Duma. A fine fellow. We've several Zulus here, but he's the best of the bunch."

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John found he had been allocated a hut next to Lieutenant King. It had no door and looked gloomy inside. Somers went in and hauled out a lantern.

"I'll light this. You get your belongings."

"Right."

John found his things stacked near the Captain's hut. When he had them stowed, Somers called out, "That's my hut. The one with the fire lit. Come over when you're ready."

"Thank you," replied John.

The old settler seemed a friendly sort—the type of man you could rely on. Still, Shackford would be the one who carried the weight when the ship sailed. And he would be working for Shackford.

John stowed his seachest at the back of the hut and placed his possessions on it: his brace of pistols, Seaman's Manual, magnifying glass and cutlass.

When his hut was tidy, he turned the lamp down and went to the entrance. Then he remembered Somers' warning about snakes and went back for his pistol. He lifted the cocking piece and checked the priming. It looked dry. He closed the pan again, stuck the weapon into his belt and went outside. He did not want to be caught unarmed—not in this sort of country.

From the beach, the tangled vegetation behind the huts looked grim and threatening. Huge trees thrust towering branches into the half-dark sky as if trying to escape the strangling creepers round their thick trunks.

Seawards, the lamps of the *Elizabeth* had been lit and dribbled their yellow reflections in the still water. A thin call echoed across the water as the quarter-

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master piped "hands to dinner."

John felt a lump in his throat as he looked at the little ship then back at his hut. The jungle grew right up to the back of it and he felt suddenly glad that he had left his lantern alight. He did not want to have to grope around for it in the dark when he got back.

He took a step towards the fires, when suddenly he heard a voice. It came from the bush at the back of his hut.

He turned his head. English voices! His shoes were silent in the sand as he walked towards the sound. He stopped as he drew near, and listened again.

"I tell you it's a fortune—a fortune. And waiting to be . . ."

The voice dropped. Another spoke from the dark jungle:

"How do you . . ."

"John!"

He started. Somers was calling him from the beach. He moved quickly towards the old man's fire. When he had gone twenty paces he slowed and waved his hand:

"Coming!"

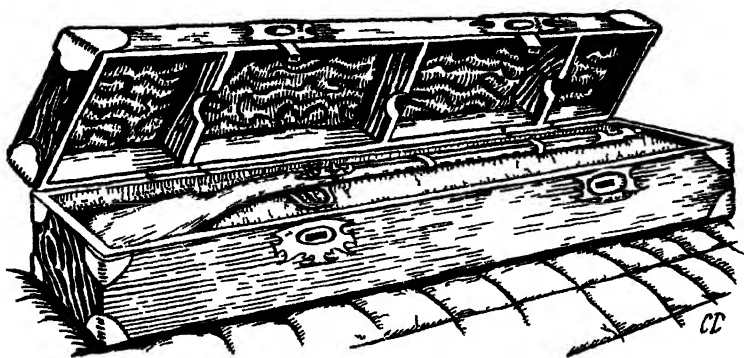
"Dinner's ready. You hungry? Come on!"

Somers's figure was silhouetted against the glow of the fire. John walked up to him, his head whirling.

Those voices had been speaking English. He knew the first man. No one could mistake that accent. But who was Shackford talking to?

What was this fortune they had been talking about? The Secretary had sounded anxious. Yet . . .

John frowned. He had sounded greedy, too.



CHAPTER TWO

* * *

Fever Strikes

NEXT afternoon John reported to the Captain. Lieutenant King looked up from his table as John came into the hut.

"I expect you to be a good shot, Ross, by the time the *Elizabeth* returns."

"I'll try, sir."

John hesitated as the Captain smiled up at him. Should he say anything of what he had heard last night? Perhaps it would be wiser to keep silent. After all, Shackford was the Secretary of the settlement and King might think his dislike of the fat Secretary had magnified a scrap of conversation.

So John simply saluted and asked, "Permission to carry on, sir?"

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And King replied, "Carry on my boy."

Somers and Duma were waiting outside the old settler's hut. The Zulu carried a spear in his right hand and a small leather bag in his left. Somers had a long-barrelled musket on his right shoulder.

"Shall I draw a musket from store?" panted John.

"No, lad. We'll use mine," replied Somers. "Duma, here, has powder and shot enough for a regiment."

John smiled at the Zulu who raised his spear and said: "*Inkosi!*"

"What does that mean?" asked John as they walked down the beach.

"Oh, 'little master' or 'little lord.' Something like that. Stick to Duma and you'll learn all about Africa. Learn his language. Talk to him as often as you can. He knows more about animals and this country than anyone else here, including da Silva."

"The Portuguese that Shackford was talking to yesterday?"

"Yes, that's him. He's a hunter. Excellent shot, too. I don't like him. I think he's a trouble maker, but I'll hand him that."

They came to a secluded clearing about a quarter of a mile from the settlement. Somers put the long musket between his knees and Duma opened up the leather bag.

Somers took powder and shot from the bag, loaded the musket and handed the long weapon to John.

"See if you can hit that." Somers pointed to a thin-stemmed wattle about thirty yards away.

His hand shook slightly as he looked down the heavy

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barrel. The tree-trunk seemed infinitely smaller now. He held his breath as the foresight blotted out the tree, and pressed the trigger. The gun crashed out, thudding against his shoulder.

He winced at the kick, then stepped forward through the powder-smoke to look. White splintered bark showed three feet above the ground.

"Hit!" grunted Somers. "Load, go back twenty paces and try again."

John aimed at the white bark this time and fired as the sight came on to the target.

"Miss!" yelled Somers. "Try again!"

That night John's shoulder ached from the blast and his ears sang. It was a long time before he fell asleep. . . .

In the weeks that followed he helped on the *Elizabeth* during the mornings, and spent his afternoons with Somers and Duma. His shooting improved daily and the Zulu language was easier than he had thought it would be. After constant practice with Duma he was able to string small sentences together. Duma was able to speak a little English which he had learned from the settlers, and they soon found that they were able to carry on a conversation without having to search for too many words.

One afternoon, walking back from their improvised range, Somers rubbed the back of his grizzled head and muttered:

"Feel as if I've another bout coming." John's lips framed a question when Somers went on, "Fever, lad. It comes and goes. All the other settlers are finished with it by now. I'm the only one who still gets it. Once

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your eyes get a sort of yellow tinge you know you're finished with it."

John shifted the heavy gun to his left shoulder as Somers spoke.

"But that Secretary, now. He won't get fever. Have you noticed his eyes? They're yellow. I'll warrant he's been in some fever land before he came here."

"Yes," replied John. "I heard him telling Mr. Leverton that he'd spent some time in the West Indies."

"Thought so," grunted Somers. "Oh, by the way, the Captain said he wanted to see you this evening."

"Me?"

"Yes. Didn't say what it was about. You know, he looked a bit pale today. . . "

Later that night, John squared his shoulders as he came to the Captain's hut. He cleared his throat.

"Apprentice Ross reporting, sir."

"Come in."

King was seated at a table, writing. His face looked white and drawn, but he smiled and pointed to a mahogany box lying on his cot.

"Open it, Ross."

John undid the gleaming brass clasps and pushed back the lid. He caught his breath. Nestling on a bed of green baize was a double-barrelled gun. The lamp-light flickered on the twin barrels and picked out the delicate chasing on breech and trigger guard.

"Pick it up, lad. Examine it closely."

John handled the weapon carefully. "Sir," he breathed, "this is a wonderful piece."

Fever Strikes

"It is a rifle," answered King. "If you put a finger down the muzzles you'll be able to feel little ridges in the bore. It can shoot three times as fast as Somers' musket—and ten times farther and ten times as accurately, too. It's yours for as long as you are in Africa."

John stared. "Mine, sir?"

"Yes, lad. Look after it and it will look after you. Take it with you and keep it in your hut."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" cried John. "I'll keep it safe until the *Elizabeth* returns!"

"I know you will," replied King. "The ship should be ready to sail within a week now. You'll find the year will go quickly!"

John nodded. "Yes, sir."

He replaced the rifle gently in its case and closed the lid. As he walked from the hut, King called to him: "Ask Mr. Shackford to come over here in an hour or so, will you?"

"Aye, aye, sir," replied John.

He spent some time in his hut examining the rifle, putting it to his shoulder, and looking down the gleaming barrels. A rifle! There wasn't another weapon like it in the whole settlement!

But his excitement was tinged with depression. King would soon be gone. Shackford would be his master, with da Silva as his lieutenant. Strange how those two had become so friendly during the past three weeks. He frowned. He had better get along to the Secretary's hut and give him King's message. He replaced the rifle and laid the case on his bunk.

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The settlement was in darkness but for two lamplit dwellings. King was probably still writing and Shackford looked as if he was still up. John walked across the sand to the Secretary's doorway and knocked.

There was no reply.

He knocked again and entered. The feeble light from a lamp burning on the table showed the hut to be empty. Shackford's scientific equipment still lay stacked against the far wall and on one of these boxes were some papers. Reports, probably.

John walked across to look at them. He picked one up then turned as he heard Shackford's petulant voice at the doorway.

"How do we know they will keep their word?"

Da Silva's reply was arrogant. "They know me well. They think I m. . ."

He stopped abruptly as they entered the hut. Shackford's eyes blazed.

"What are you doing here?" he yelled.

John started at the look on Shackford's face.

"I—" he began.

"Spying, you little swine! Spying, eh?" Shackford's eyes went past him to the boxes stacked against the wall. "Didn't think I was here, eh? Looking, were you!"

John frowned. "I was not," he replied stoutly. "I came here to give you a message."

"Don't lie to me!" Shackford's pudgy hand went back. John watched it and clenched his fist.

"I came to give you a message, Mr. Shackford. From Lieutenant King. He wants to see you."

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What was the matter with the Secretary? He seemed scared to death.

Shackford dropped his hand and John put the report back on the box. He could sense the hostility from the two men like a wall in front of him.

"You believe 'eem?" da Silva was speaking now.

Shackford turned and muttered something to the Portuguese. Da Silva shrugged his shoulders and left the hut.

John saw a cunning look creep into the Secretary's eyes. Then Shackford said, "All right, Ross. Get out."

As John left the hut he saw Shackford stumble swiftly to the boxes against the wall.

Next morning John blinked at the bright sunlight and shot upright as he heard shouting outside. It was late, well past dawn. He should have been up hours ago!

A knot of men were gathered round King's hut, shouting and gesticulating, and John ran towards them.

"Where's the Captain?" he cried, catching a seaman by the arm. "Or Mr. Somers? What's the matter?"

"Bad news," replied the seaman. "The fever's struck. Captain's down with it. Mr. Leverton, too. And the Commander, Mr. Fynn."

"Aye," called another. "And yon Somers and four of us seamen."

"It's all right for the settlers," growled the bos'un, walking up. "They're used to these bouts. But we seamen will catch it soon enough."

The men suddenly parted as Shackford strode up, followed by da Silva. The Secretary's voice was

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authoritative as he faced the small group of men.

"In view of this sickness which has struck the officers of this settlement," he shouted, "I have assumed command. Our stock of medicines is low and we'll have to fetch more! The nearest supply is at Delagoa Bay, a Portuguese settlement, six hundred miles north of here."

The men stared open mouthed at the Secretary. His fat checks wobbled as he went on.

"The *Elizabeth* can't sail. No one can navigate her. As it is we can't spare a man. Mr. da Silva, whom I've made second in command, tells me we might be attacked by a roving tribe from the south. We'll need every man to defend this settlement."

John saw the Secretary stare at him, fixedly.

"You'll have to go."

"Me?" John's heart felt big in his throat.

"Yes, you! I'll give you five gold pieces to buy medicines with. Take five of the Zulus to act as bearers. Leave in the morning!"

"Madness!" cried the bos'un. "The lad's too young."

The seamen and settlers agreed vociferously.

"Silence!" yelled Shackford. "I've told you we can't spare a man. The boy must go. That is my order."

John clenched his fists at his sides. Behind him, the surf thundered on the white beach and he felt the blazing sun beating on his bare head. It was six hundred miles to Delagoa Bay. Six hundred miles of uncharted forbidding territory where no white man had ever been before.

He felt the bos'un take his arm. "It looks as if our

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lives depend on you, lad. I'll help you get ready. Then I'll see about getting the guns off the *Elizabeth*. We'll have to prepare some sort of defence."

John nodded silently as he walked back to his hut. His mind was whirling. This journey would be suicide! He started getting his kit together. Six hundred miles!

That afternoon Duma ploughed up through the sand as John oiled the double rifle. The Zulu's eyes widened as he saw the weapon and he said, "Hau! Two pipes!"

Then he remembered himself and, lifting his spear, cried, "*Inkosi!*"

John lifted his hand in salutation. Duma gestured northwards with his spear. "I hear you go to the far country, *Inkosi!*"

"Yes."

"I come too." Duma smiled. "I will get four men for bearers. It is far to the land of the Portuguese, but with that gun we will be safe."

The big Zulu smiled again and ploughed away.

The afternoon flew in frenzied preparation. Powder horns were filled, shot pouches crammed full and salt venison stowed in leather packs for the journey.

As the light began to fade, John took the big rifle to the beach. He thought he had better test it before they started. The weapon handled smoothly as he planted the foresight on a shell about two hundred yards away and pressed the trigger.

The shell vanished in a cloud of splinters and the whine of the ricochet sounded clearly over the sand.

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John sucked in his breath. This gun was fast. At this rate it would shoot accurately at five hundred yards! As he turned to go back to his hut he saw Shackford eyeing him from the settlement. The fat Secretary caught his eye, then turned abruptly and walked away.

Next morning, the dawn light picked out the sleeping settlement as Duma helped John strap on his equipment. The big Zulu also wore a hunting knife, a cutlass, and carried two spears and knobkerries in his right hand. Four more Zulus stood sullenly behind him.

John held his heavy rifle at the trail and felt the weighty pack drag his shoulders back.

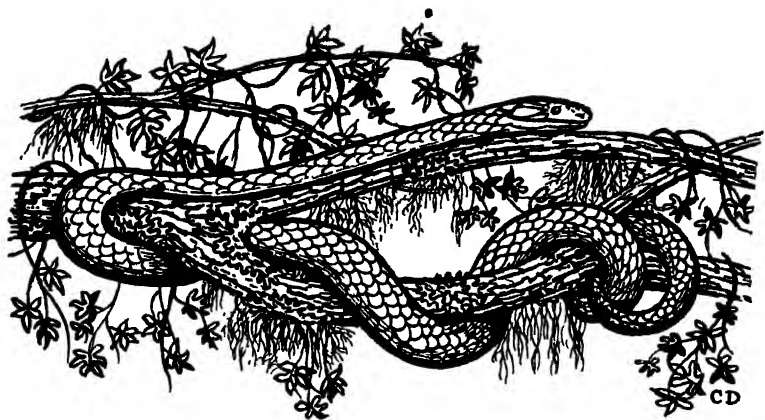
"*Lungih*, Duma? Ready now?"

"*Lungih*, *Inkon*!" answered the Zulu.

John took a last look at the settlement. A big bird flapped its way overhead and on the silent beach a seagull screamed mournfully.

John closed his mouth in a firm line as he turned to Duma.

"Right," he said, jerking his head northwards, "Come on!"



CHAPTER THREE

* * *

The Trek Begins

THE loose sand on the beach made the going heavy and they sank ankle-deep into it at every step. It was like trying to walk through an enormous bowl of sugar. Eastwards, the sun was a vermillion sphere poised on the deep-blue horizon.

Duma's glistening frame was bent under his pack and his leather skirt flapped round his thighs as he ploughed along. Behind, the bearers muttered to themselves, breathing heavily as they struggled to keep up. Their loads were not heavy, but Duma had set a cracking pace.

John strained his ears, but could not make out what they were saying. Frowning, he hitched at his pack straps. Those bearers had not been at all happy when

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they had been told where they were going. Their sullen mood was understandable.

This was back-breaking work compared with their easy lives at the settlement.

The sun blazed down now and turned the beach into a furnace of heat. John winced as the hot sand scorched through the leather soles of his shoes, and his tongue tasted the sweat which was now running freely down his face. He shifted the heavy rifle to his right shoulder. The sooner they got off this beach, the better he would like it.

Half an hour later, Duma led the way round a small sand bluff. He stopped and pointed.

"There! The big river—the Umgeni!"

"Is it deep?"

"No. There is a place where we can walk across. Then no more sand. We take the road of the elephant."

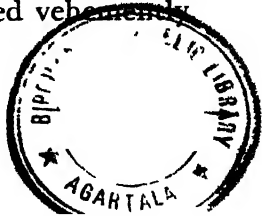
"Through the bush?"

"Yes, *Inkosi*. The jungle kings trample great paths as they walk. We will travel along one of these."

"Good."

John felt a spurt of relief. His feet would blister if they kept to this sand much longer. He plunged after Duma, down the bank and across the river.

Later that day, the elephant walk turned west. They left it and struck northwards through elephant grass. John's trousers were plastered with river mud, but beside him, Duma's bare legs were beginning to suffer from the sharp grass. The keen-edged blades reduced unprotected ankles and calves to a mass of bleeding cuts, and the bearers protested vehemently.



The Trek Begins

Duma took no notice of them at first. But after another mile he stopped and drew his cutlass. "This grass cuts deep," he grunted. "Let us cover our legs."

He pricked the cutlass into a patch of soft clay then scooped up handfuls and plastered his legs. The bearers covered their limbs in the same way, while John, leaning on his rifle, looked on curiously.

"Why do you do that, Duma?"

The Zulu patted the last of the smooth mud over his smarting skin. "It will be a shield against this grass, *Inkosi*."

"Won't it crack off when it dries? The swamp mud has flaked off my shoes now that it is dry."

"No, *Inkosi*. It will stick to the hairs of our legs. When we come to water we will be able to wash it off. This clay has powers of healing, too. Our cuts will be better by nightfall."

Far ahead the grassy plain ended in bush, similar to the jungle near the settlement. It was a wide belt, running from the shore to far inland where it plunged like a green waterfall over the horizon.

Duma came closer and addressed John quietly as they walked.

"Through that bush, *Inkosi*, is the place of the evil ones. The AmaBatnas!" His lips curled in disgust. "They eat those whom they capture."

John turned his head. Cannibals! The four bearers behind began shattering, softly at first, then louder. Duma cast a glance at them over his shoulder and continued:

"These AmaBatnas are outcasts from many tribes.

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They live like so many animals, never washing or oiling their bodies. They lack skill at hunting and their meat hunger is great. They raid other tribes for victims." The Zulu's voice dropped to a growl.

"And your tribe, the Zulus?" asked John.

Duma laughed. "No! No, *Inkosi!* The Zulu nation have great herds of cattle and much skill at hunting. They are the mighty nation of this country."

"Is that their land that we see ahead?"

"Their land begins a day's march from here. North, to the Great Lake, south to the Great River, west to the Mighty Mountains and east to the sea. All this land belongs to the Zulu people and to their King, the Black Elephant, Chaka."

"They conquered this territory?"

"Yes. No tribe could withstand us. I, too, fought for the Black Elephant. My regiment was the Household Guard of the King. He called us the 'Blue Haze of Zululand' because of the blue feathers we wore in our head-dresses." Duma's voice grew gruff and his eyes shone. "We were the 'Blues' of Zululand! Warriors of the Land of Heaven! When we marched the ground trembled, like thunder over the land. I was a Captain and carried the black and white shield of my rank. . . ."

The big Zulu was silent for a while, then he said, "But the way of Chaka is death. He dreams only of blood. That is why I fled to the settlement."

The long grassy miles stretched away to the horizon. The sun was now an active discomfort, burning and stinging and drying rivulets of sweat into salty strips down chests and arms. Overhead, three vultures coasted

The Trek Begins

slowly along, their spread wing feathers like black brush strokes against the sky.

Duma halted at the outskirts of the forest.

"Through here lies the land of the AmaBatnas. Don't use the great gun, *Inkosi*," he warned. "We must travel with stealth."

He moved forward when one of the bearers shouted. John turned and saw they had put down their packs. One of them, with a deep scar running the length of his cheek, acted as spokesman. He would go no farther, he cried. The other three nodded their heads and agreed vociferously.

John faced them, hands on his hips

"You fear danger?"

"Indeed, *Inkosi*," they chorused. "Beyond this forest is an evil land. We wish to return to the settlement."

John bit his lip. He could not let them go back. They carried food and trade goods for the journey. He would need these goods to barter with, when they came to native settlements. He screwed up his face as he tried to think of something to say.

Duma sprang forward, and the squat bearer shrank back as the tall Zulu spat at him.

"Coward! Son of a cattle chief! Ox! Pick up your load! And you three, too. The man who disobeys will taste this!" He shook his spear at them. "Quickly! The *Inkosi* must get medicines for the sick at the settlement. So move!"

The bearers hesitated, and the scarred man opened his mouth. He snapped it quickly shut when Duma advanced. The bearers swung up their packs.

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John took hold of Duma's arm as the Zulu walked back, scowling.

"Why are they so frightened?"

The big Zulu shot him a meaning glance. "They must be cowards, *Inkosi*," he replied evasively.

John nodded slowly. They looked frightened enough. But why? He advanced into the dim forest after Duma's tall figure.

It was cool and wet in the depths. The harsh sunshine was filtered by the overhanging greenery into thin trickles of light. Branches swished above their heads and a few leaves fluttered down. Duma looked round and grinned.

"Monkeys. They will not harm us. Their kingdom is up there."

After a few minutes he suddenly narrowed his eyes and pointed to a tree half-covered in moss.

"There, *Inkosi*! There is something to fear. Do you see it?"

John frowned into the gloom. After several seconds, he made out the snake coiled round a moss-covered branch. It was bright green and blended almost perfectly with its surroundings. The head lay flat on the bark, eyes glinting brilliantly.

"The snake of Death," murmured Duma.

"What!"

"One bite means death—and quickly."

"How quickly?"

"A few minutes."

John sucked in his breath. "What do you call it?"

"Mamba. That is a green one. There are black ones,

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too. Both are deadly. Their poison is great."

As the bush grew thicker, John drew his cutlass and helped Duma carve a way through the creeper-strewn wilderness. Slashing at the vines, John could not help thinking about the mamba. The snake had been almost invisible.

The journey through the forest became a nightmare. Every creeper seemed a snake, every leaf that moved concealed a dart-like head, two poisonous fangs. The bearers started a moaning complaint again, but Duma's spear soon hushed them into silence.

Then the jungle grew lighter, the trees thinned and they stepped thankfully into the hard sunlight. After a few miles through long grass Duma pointed with his spear. John's eyes followed the black shaft.

"There lies the great flat mountain, *Inkosi*."

"Where we shall sleep?"

"Yes."

John kept his eyes on it as they went forward. It looked about three thousand feet high. As they neared it John stopped as he heard something rustle in the grass on his left.

"What is it, *Inkosi*?"

"I think I heard something in the grass. Over there."

They stopped, silently, waiting.

Duma spoke quietly at his elbow. "Probably a buck. Come."

They pushed on as the sun sank lower in the western sky. It dipped below the summit of the mountain as they reached the foothills. Duma pointed to a cave which gaped like a black mouth a few hundred feet

Thunder over Africa

up the shale-covered slope. He turned to John. "There is the cave. We can camp now, and eat."

Two bearers made a small fire in the mouth of the cave and Duma produced lumps of dried meat and some cooked mealie meal from his pack.

The bearers sat some distance away, munching stolidly. John heard them muttering. The scar-cheeked fellow turned his head towards Duma, then whispered. The others nodded.

John felt uneasy as he sat on a rock by the fire. There was something the matter with the bearers, some reason why they did not want to carry on. And what was it he had heard in the grass?

He put his rifle between his knees, pushed a hand into his pack and started munching a piece of meat. The sun was down now and a grey twilight settled over the plain. A hunting lion roared noisily in the dark grass.

Back at the little settlement they might already be fighting for their lives—the men with muskets and the bos'un with his cannon—if da Silva had been right. John took another bite at the meat. The Portuguese and Shackford were always together. Not as friends, but rather as accomplices.

He remembered the way Shackford had shouted at him in the hut. What was the Secretary so suspicious about? Did he and da Silva have some secret?

John munched away in the half dark, frowning to himself.

Later, the bearers huddled together at the entrance of the cave. John walked past them, laid his rifle at his

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side and rested his head on his pack. The floor of the cave was cold, hard and uncomfortable.

Next morning John woke as Duma shouted again. He blundered to the cave mouth and stood blinking in the light.

"Quickly, *Inkosi*! The bearers have fled!"

John took a step forward. "What . . ."

Duma pointed at something lying on the ground. John walked up to him and stopped, a cold chill in his stomach.

His straw hat lay on the shale, a dead bird resting on it. A circle of stones surrounded the hat and blood was soaking into the crown.





CHAPTER FOUR

* * *

Sign of the AmaBatnas

JOHN stared at this ominous collection on the ground. The stones shone smooth and black, like river pebbles. The dead bird on his hat was minus its head. The huddle of objects appeared to be some grotesque fetish.

"What does it mean, Duma?"

"The sign of Death—the sign of the AmaBatnas!"

The Zulu was worried and kept hefting the spears in his right hand, his eyes fixed on the blood-spattered hat.

"Then the AmaBatnas know we're here!" John half-turned to the cave. "And where have the bearers gone? Back to the settlement?"

"Those cowards fled in the night. May the spirits wither them!" Anger drove the fear from Duma's face and he thumped the haft of his spear savagely in the

Sign of the AmaBatnas

earth. "Sons of oxen! If they were here we might have made a fight of it!"

So the bearers had fled rather than face the AmaBatnas. John's brain jumped back to the noise he had heard in the grass the day before. Maybe the AmaBatnas had known of their presence all the time. Perhaps they had been watching and waiting.

"Quickly, *Inkosi*. We must go!" Duma made an urgent motion with his hand.

"They're going to attack us?"

"Yes."

John took a few quick strides to the cave, and strapped on his pack. They had to get out of this place and head north. There could be no thought of turning back. As for the bearers—they would just have to do without them. He checked the priming of his rifle while he urged Duma to hurry.

"Why didn't these AmaBatnas kill us last night? They took my hat without my knowing. We were at their mercy!"

Duma panted as he struggled with his pack. "They never kill straight away. This sign is their threat. The hat says, 'You must die.' The bird says, 'I will die first.' The stones and the blood mean that this is a sacred place."

Sacred place? John shot a glance at the cave and moved his shoulders uncomfortably.

At last Duma was ready. "Even now they are watching us, *Inkosi*. They will hunt us—then kill us."

John felt his heart hammer at his ribs, and he tightened his grip on the rifle.

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"What lies ahead?" he asked, his voice gruff.

"A great ravine. We must cross it to get to the Zulu country." Duma sounded desperate.

As John hitched up his pack straps his eyes fell on his hat. He bent suddenly, wiped it and crammed it on his head. "Come on," he gritted. "There is a chance. We still have this." He patted the big rifle.

Duma pounded after him as he galloped down the foot-hill, his leather-soled shoes slipping and sliding in the shale. By the time they reached the plain he was panting. He waved an enquiring hand at Duma, and the Zulu pointed with his spear.

He stumbled along, his feet catching in tough grass roots and stubbing painfully into half-buried stones, while Duma panted beside him, explaining in short bursts of speech.

The northern route was blocked by a waterless desert where no man could survive. South lay the Land of the Mamba, the land of the Death Snake. That serpent-infested territory was impassable. Their only hope lay in crossing the great gorge that lay ahead.

He found himself wondering how far it was. Duma had got his second wind now and loped along at his side. They skirted a small thorn bush, and John shifted the rifle into his left hand. The big gun seemed to grow heavier every breathless second.

"Why do they want to kill us? We did no harm at the cave."

"A sacred place is sacred," puffed Duma. "Listen! They are hunting us now."

A thin bird-call sounded on their left. It was

Sign of the AmaBatnas

answered by another on the right. The long grass rustled. His head jerked round. They were all around them, slipping silently along, waiting for the moment to strike.

His legs ached, his eyes felt swollen and his face burned. But he forced himself along. Now it was run—run or die!

Bent double with fatigue, they lurched on to a dirt-path. John paused, panting for a moment, while Duma threw himself down and put an ear to the ground. He raised a finger to his lips, and beckoned.

"*Inkosi*," he whispered, "they close in. I can hear them. Four on our left. I don't know how many on our right."

John wound the rifle-sling round his arm, and loosened the pistols in his belt. "Where does this path lead?"

"To the gorge."

"Come on, then. Cover the left. I'll look after the right."

Both blind sides would be taken care of in this way. They blundered down the path, and John lurched into Duma as it hooked suddenly to the left. He jerked up as a blood-curdling yell split the air, and Duma stiffened at his side.

John blinked the sweat from his eyes as two painted savages burst from the grass into the path.

Their faces were daubed with red ochre, and long yellow smears ran the length of their legs. Stabbing spears glinted in their hands. Duma halted, panting, and tried to speak. The left hand attacker flung back

Thunder over Africa

his spear-arm. They both yelled as they charged.

John slung his rifle and pulled the pistols 'out. To steady his aim he held the guns at arm's length and squinted down the barrels. The warriors' eyes were glazed with a red film.

John pulled the trigger, swung his body, aimed at the second man and fired again.

One warrior whirled in the gun-smoke and shrieked as he hit the path. The second bent silently. He swayed, doubled up, then crumpled.

John felt sweat chilling his back as he stuffed the pistols hurriedly back into his belt. He unslung his rifle, cocking it in one motion, and swivelled round at the scream behind him. His finger relaxed on the trigger as Duma lugged his spear from something hidden in the grass. The Zulu grabbed his arm and leaped with him over the prone savages in front.

"Quickly, *Inkosi!*" he panted. "The enemy will first put stones in the mouths of the dead men. Hurry! Hurry!"

John felt the hard brown fingers bite into his arm. His tired legs felt like lumps of knotted flesh and sharp pains shot up his thighs as he ran.

"How—far—now?" The words came painfully.

They stumbled another two hundred yards, and the trees thinned away.

"See! The gorge!"

"We can't cross that!"

John felt his knees melt as he spoke. The gorge was at least thirty feet across. It ran left and right as far as the eye could see—a deep brown fissure in the hot soil.

Sign of the AmaBatnas

He peered over the brink, but could not see the bottom.

"There is a place where the side narrows and we could just walk across. But there is no time to look for it now, *Inkosi*. We must cross here, or be killed."

John bit his lip. This was hopeless. They would never be able to cross before the AmaBatnas caught up. The only thing to do now was to try to make a fight of it, beat them off until nightfall, and try to escape in the dark. He pulled out his empty pistols to load them, when Duma shouted:

"There! Look, *Inkosi*!"

The Zulu ran to a tall sapling growing near the edge of the ravine, and began chopping feverishly at it. John leaped after him and hacked at the other side. The wood was sappy. The sharp cutlasses stuck as they hit home, and it was a struggle to withdraw them. The tree creaked.

Duma grappled the trunk with his huge brown arms. As he heaved his muscles stood out under his skin and his lips curled back over his teeth.

"It won't move, *I kosi*. It won't."

The veins in his biceps rippled like thick cord. John stuck the point of his cutlass in the ground and leaped up. His extra weight gave more leverage and the tree cracked. He let go, gave a last despairing slash at the splintering trunk and the tree fell—right across the gap.

He wiped the dust from his eyes and spat. "Right, Duma. You go first. It won't hold two. I'll follow!"

The Zulu grabbed up his pack, straddled the trunk and began to worm his way across. The slim sapling sagged as he reached the middle. John watched him, a

Thunder over Africa

tight feeling in his chest. Duma edged forward and flung out a hand.

As soon as he touched the opposite bank, John clambered on to the tree. The rough bark tore at his arms and thighs as he inched across, and sweat poured down his face. A crash echoed in the ravine and the tree lurched.

He flung his arms round it, clinging like an ant over a thousand feet of nothingness.

He watched, horrified, as a split edged along the trunk. It stopped at a branch. The wood looked white under the cracked bark. He began to worm forward again when a triumphant shout rang out behind. He froze as the tree moved under him. He twisted his head to look back.

Several tribesmen were heaving at the trunk. The base was perilously close to the lip of the ravine. Another heave and he would hurtle into the depths. He gritted his teeth and pulled forward. Still another twelve feet to go.

Duma's hand went back and his hunting-stick whirled through the air. There was a cry behind and the flailing body of a tribesman pitched screaming into the blackness below.

John lunged forward and grabbed a tuft of grass growing from the bank. He dug his knees into the earth and scrambled to safety.

More AmaBatnas poured through the forest on the other side. They yelled as they began crossing by the tree, several at a time. Their weight cracked the sapling still further. A fourth tried to cross and the trunk

Sign of the AmaBatnas

suddenly snapped, and the bodies hurtled down.

Before the screams had died away a vengeful cry echoed across the ravine. One of the AmaBatnas was shouting and waving his spear.

"What does he say, Duma?"

"If we pass this way again we will die." The Zulu turned meaningly. "And," he added, "we still have to return with the medicines."

John hid his uneasiness in a short reply as he shouldered his rifle.

"Come on. We have a long way to go."

A slow smile spread over Duma's face and the confidence came back into his eyes. John pointed to the north and set off, knees lifting high through the long grass.

For all the brave front he had assumed, he felt worried about the return journey. With the bearers gone, their task had become infinitely more difficult. The odds had been six against countless dangers—it had now dwindled to two!

They could try the desert to the north, but Duma had said no man had ever been through there. And even the AmaBatnas were preferable to the snake-infested south. He shuddered and wiped a hard across his face.

No! They would have to come this way home. And those savage tribesmen, stung by their defeat, would be waiting. It had been a close shave. They would never have crossed if the AmaBatnas had not stopped to put the stones in the mouths of their dead. He asked Duma the reason.

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The Zulu wiped a forearm across his brown chest.

"It is their belief, *Inkosi*. If a man dies and his mouth lies open, evil spirits will enter his body through it. Those spirits will prevent him joining his fathers in the place of snakes. The stones guard against the spirits."

John nodded. "What is this place of snakes?"

"They believe that when a man dies his spirit enters into the body of a snake."

John eased the rifle on his shoulder. It seemed that every day he spent in this strange land he learned some new belief or creed held by its savage inhabitants.

The long grass gave way to hilly, bush-studded country. It stretched as far as the eye could see—hard brown land, dotted with little thorn trees. Inland, the intense heat of the sun set up a haze that smeared out the horizon.

Duma gestured ahead. "This is the land of the Zulu," he volunteered. "Here I have a few friends. Tonight we will sleep at my cousin's kraal. They will give us food and water."

John's leather-soled shoes slipped on the hard, dry grass and made the march a leg-wrenching process. The hard edged leather pack straps kept rubbing on the same raw patches on his shoulders. But the thought of food and water kept him going until sunset, when Duma spotted the kraal.

There were three beehive huts, clustered near a small pool. John hitched at his pack and ploughed after Duma. He could smell woodsmoke and the aroma of roasting meat.



CHAPTER FIVE

* * *

Hunting for Food and Water

THREE brown skinned men walked from the huts and John saw them look wide eyed at him while Duma made the customary greetings. One of them, an old man, addressed John

"You are right, old father," replied John "I am an *umlungu* I come from far across the great waters I go to the place of the black haired *umlungu*, the Portuguese."

The Zulus widened their eyes and they uttered the ejaculation: "Hau!"

Duma laughed, and turning, said: "*Inkosi*, their wonder is great. They have never seen a white man before." He told his cousins of the episode with the AmaBatnas, at which they spat and shook their heads

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in disgust at the behaviour of the loathsome tribe.

The old man came forward, took John by the arm and led the way to the huts.

Women brought meat and John tucked in heartily while the Zulus talked far into the night. By concentrating, he was able to follow their conversation.

The Zulu army was west on a war expedition so they would be able to get through Chaka's country fairly easily. But, from the north had come rumours of Tonga movements. They were the ones to be feared.

At length the fires were banked up and John spread a mat in one of the huts. His pack served as a pillow.

The interior of the dwelling swirled with wood-smoke from a small fire in the middle of the floor. "Tell me, Duma," John said, his nostrils tickling, "why don't you make a hole in the roof for the smoke to escape?"

"Hau, *Inkosi!* Then we would never sleep," grunted the Zulu. "This smoke kills all the small animals that live in the thatch."

John knuckled his streaming eyes. So the choice was between vermin and smoke. He coughed, then lay back and tried to sleep.

Next morning they breakfasted on boiled crushed mealies, covered with frothing milk straight from the cow. Later, refreshed and ready, John stood at Duma's side as the old man exhorted them to be cautious.

"*Hamba khale!*" he ended. Go carefully.

"*Sala khale!*" replied Duma. Stay peacefully.

The rest of the men raised their hands in salutation, then Duma turned and led the way to the forest.

The trees were taller than at the coast, and grew

Hunting for Food and Water

wider apart. Duma padded silently ahead, breaking the trail, his sharp cutlass slicing effortlessly through tough lianas and creepers. The ground was covered with moss which formed an easy road for their tired feet. John felt the rifle thumping comfortably on his shoulder as he marched and, fingering the butt, he found himself wondering about King and the rest of the sick men at the settlement. How long would it really take to get back with the medicines? He panted up a slope in the forest and jerked his thoughts back as he saw the river, two hundred yards away.

"The Tugela," snorted Duma heavily, leaning on his spear. "Now we shall have to swim."

"Swim?" echoed John. "But what about the powder? That mustn't get wet!"

"It will be best," said Duma, as they walked to the bank, "if I strap the pack with the powder to my head. That will keep it dry."

"Right," replied John. "I'll take the rifle. I'll give it a good clean when we get over."

Duma went first with the powder pack on his head. Then John tied the second pack high on the back of his neck, put the rifle on it and passed the sling tightly under his chin.

He felt the icy water lap at his chest, his chin, then his feet left bottom and he began to swim through the water. Halfway across he winced as he knocked against a sharp, submerged rock and he clung to it for a moment to regain his breath before striking out again.

As they stood drying on the bank, John cleaned his rifle while Duma scratched a trap in the bank with his

Thunder over Africa

spear. Then he used to point in their direction.

"There to the north lies the place of the hippopotamus."

"How far, Duma?"

"A few days. All this is bare country. No people live here. There is little water. No rivers. Only water-holes where the animals drink at night."

"I don't see any game trails," said John, studying the ground.

"We will see further on, *Inkosi*. Our food is finished and we should kill for the pot."

The hard miles reeled off under their tramping feet. The plain was laced with the huge *dongas* of Africa—deep, sandy gorges which cut into the red earth. Overhead, vultures wheeled in the burning sky, their sharp eyes searching.

By sunset John was tired out. His step slowed and he had difficulty in keeping up with the tall Zulu.

"How much further, Duma?"

His companion pointed to a tall tree about half-a-mile away. "We will sleep there, *Inkosi*," John nodded. The graze on his chest had stiffened. He eased his pack-strap away from it as he ploughed along. He needed a rest. This country seemed to suck the energy out of you. It was the heat that did it.

The tree was about thirty feet in circumference, it reached high up into the darkening sky.

"This is a good place, *Inkosi*."

"No snakes?"

Duma grinned. "No snakes, *Inkosi*!"

John shrugged off his pack and dumped it on the

Hunting for Food and Water

cool grass. The thick branches of the tree would provide shelter from any rain that night. Duma got to work on a small pit which he lined with flat stones.

When he had finished he stood up. "Now," he chuckled, "we will find something to eat." John picked up his rifle and followed him to a small, sand-fringed pool. Duma pressed back a hand warningly, turned his head and put a finger to his lips.

"Look!" he whispered. "At the pool. Do you see them? Small pigs."

John strained his eyes in the bad light and listened intently as Duma whispered: "I will go to the other side and drive them past you. And, *Inkon* . . ." He broke off.

"What, Duma?"

"When *Inkoos* Somers was shooting these pigs he always shot them here—" the Zulu patted his shoulder.

John nodded and grinned. "All right."

He checked his priming as the Zulu stole silently through the long grass to circle the pool.

Crouching, his rifle ready, he could just make out the small brown bodies of the wild pigs as they wallowed, grunting, near the pool. There were four of them.

A shadowy figure moved silently at the far end of the patch of water. Suddenly it sprang into action. Duma threw stones at the animals and yelled. The pigs cocked their heads and their ears went back as Duma advanced at a run, bellowing all the time.

They turned swiftly and broke into a jogging gallop across the plain. John watched carefully. They ran close

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to the ground, almost scuffling their bodies along.

He dropped to one knee and his rifle steadied on the leader. The black foresight tracked after it. The pig bobbed up and down. Then he fired. It gave a little leap and pitched over. The rest fled into the long grass.

Duma came racing up. He grabbed the animal by its hind legs and carried it triumphantly into camp.

"A good *inglubi*, *Inkosi*!" he cried. "A fat one."

By the time John reached him he had skinned and cleaned the trophy. A fire was soon blazing, and the appetising smell of roast pork wafted round the little camp. John sniffed hungrily as he cleaned his rifle.

Duma cut a slice of sizzling meat, rolled the crackling in salt and held it out. John took it gratefully. With a lump of boiled mealie-meal in one hand and the pork in the other, he began his meal.

This was real food, not like the salt rubbish issued afloat. He wrinkled his lips as he thought of the stringy boiled lumps swimming in potato-water which comprised the mid-day diet of Britain's lower deck. Half the seamen, he knew, would trade their favourite marline-spikes for a slice of this.

A while later, his stomach comfortably full, he put his water-bottle to his mouth. Having drunk, he pushed it back into his pack and rested his head on the grass. Duma crooned to himself as he piled pieces of wood judiciously on the fire. His voice sounded soft and melodious in the darkness.

John flung an arm under his head. It seemed incredible to be lying here, in the midst of an African wilderness. The branches of the thunder tree made a lazy pat-

Hunting for Food and Water

tern against the sky. The stars looked brighter than in northern latitudes. He stared up. He would have to learn them all before he sat his navigation examination. The roar of a hunting lion sounded loudly from the pool, followed by a curious hacking laugh of a hyena. Then all was quiet.

The morning sun burned redly through a tangle of trees when he woke. He sat up in the long grass, stretched and pulled on his shoes. Duma added a handful of powder to boiling water in their small iron pot. The coffee smelled good.

The Zulu looked up as he toasted slices of pork before the fire. The crackling popped and spluttered under the heat of the flames.

"I will cook all the pig," he said. "The way is long and hard to the place of the hippopotamus. We must carry all the meat we can. Not many beasts live on our road."

"What about water? Will we be able to carry enough in our flasks?"

"No," answered Duma gravely. "But look—I have made a vessel for extra water." He held up the pig's bladder filled with water and tied at the top with a length of grass.

"Will it keep in that?"

"I cleaned it at the pool. Still, I don't think it will keep for long. We should drink this water first. Then the water in our flasks will last until we reach the place of the hippopotamus."

The slices of pork were stowed away. John strapped on his pack. The heavy rifle swung from his other

Thunder over Africa

shoulder. Back slightly bent under the weight, he started walking.

The sun blazed down on the dry, arid plain. A heat haze rose shimmering above the yellow rustling grass, and sweat rolled into his eyes as he screwed them up against the glare. He marched stolidly on, Duma snorting beside him.

The country ahead looked brown and bare of life. "It was well we brought the pig with us," grunted Duma. "No animals here, *Inkosi*."

"Why, how do you know that?"

Duma waved his arm at the sky. "No vultures. See, the sky is empty."

True, thought John. Vultures were always present in populated territory. They stayed high, their sharp eyes searching for carrion—the old kill of a lion or, maybe, a small antelope, dead of thirst. But today the sky was empty—just a blue blazing bowl that seemed to beat down with ever-increasing intensity.

John thought of Shackford lording it at the settlement, of the sick men, of da Silva, and his mouth tightened determinedly.

Three days later, John turned his blackened face to Duma as they lurched over the burnt plain. His puffed lips could barely frame the question: "How far now?"

Duma lifted his spear at a rise in the plain two miles ahead. The afternoon sun was low in the sky and turned the long grass into a sea of flame.

"Over that ridge," he mumbled through his swollen mouth, "there lies the place of the hippopotamus."

John shook his flask for the tenth time that day. It

Hunting for Food and Water

was empty and his action had been an involuntary one. He knew it had been empty for over a day. But his parched body cried out for moisture. Duma was in no better shape. His great frame sagged at the knees. Sweat had dried in long white streaks on his brown face and arms, and his bare feet kicked in the dust as he limped ahead.

John suddenly felt his foot catch in a root. He stumbled. The plain seemed to see saw round him and waves of dizziness swam in front of his face. He called on the last slender shreds of his energy and straightened.

His eyes were nearly closed. He squinted painfully at the ridge through matted lashes. No matter how he tried, it never seemed to get any nearer. He pulled his swollen lips into his mouth and walked like a man in a dream, his legs working automatically.

It was just before sunset when the ridge swooped away and he felt his legs buckle as he looked.

Before them stretched a huge lake. It shone deep blue and reached almost to the horizon. Reeds grew thick and green around its banks. Uttering a hoarse cry, he staggered forward, tossing aside his pack and rifle, and pushed his head into the glorious coolness.

He felt Duma's hand on his arm.

"Drink little and slowly. If you drink deep now, you will fall sick by morning. Your body must get used to water again."

John found it hard to obey, and he had to use all his will-power to drag himself away from the feel of the water. But he knew Duma was right.

The sun had set and it was now too late for hunting.

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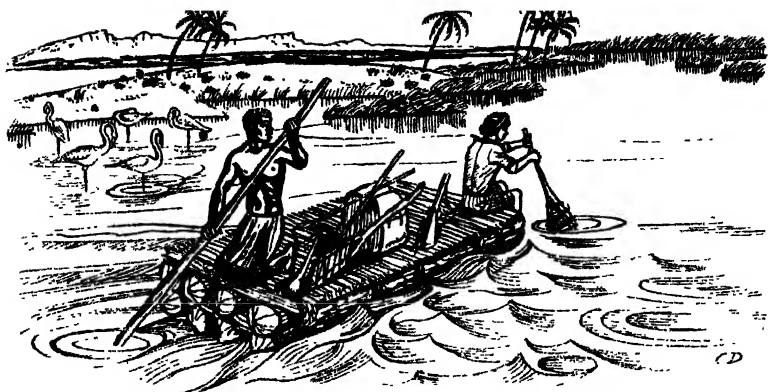
Duma drew the remains of the pork from his pack, and John took a hard, broken slice.

"Tomorrow, *Inkosi*," said Duma, his mouth full, "we will shoot and eat the goose!"

John nodded. He finished the pork and punched a place in the pack for his head. He glanced round their camp dully lit by the dying embers of the fire. Beyond that small circle was the vast darkness of the African plain, with all its perils and hazards lying in wait for them. He rolled on his side where he could see the comforting blur which was Duma's slumbering form. Duma did not let imaginary fears rob him of his rest. John envied the Zulu's placid nature and unconcern, but he could not drive away the tormenting thoughts which chased across his brain.

How many days had he been away from the settlement? Was King still alive? And Michael Somers? How much time had he left? He tried to sit up and think. But he could not even remember the date . . .

He rolled back, sound asleep.



CHAPTER SIX

* * *

In Danger from the Hippo Herd

NEXT morning Duma brought a hare into camp. John skinned and cleaned it while the Zulu lit a fire. The meat tasted tough and stringy.

After the meal he surveyed their position. They were eight days out of the settlement and Duma estimated it would take at least another fifteen to reach Delagoa Bay. That meant twenty-three days spent on the outward journey. Frowning, he stuffed his empty coffee-mug into his pack.

Profiting by lessons learned *en route*, they should be able to cut the return journey by a couple of days at least. But this still left forty-four days for the round trip. Did the fever take that long to kill a man? They would have to hurry.

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He hitched up his pack and pulled his thoughts back to what Duma was saying.

"So, *Inkosi*," continued the Zulu, poking at the earth with a pointed stick, "it will take us many days to circle this water. Four, at least. We shall have to travel carefully. The ground will be wet and the sands of death abound here!"

"Quicksands!" John felt a sudden stab of fear.

"Yes, *Inkosi*."

"Couldn't we go round them? Travel faster? Four days is a long time."

"It cannot be helped, *Inkosi*." Duma looked sadly at the huge lake. "What we need is the *Eleezbet*."

"Eleezbet? Oh, you mean the *Elizabeth*."

John grappled with this new problem. Four days! Four whole days. He grimaced at the forest. Those trees would take some cutting for a trail. Trees! He snapped his fingers. That was it!

"We'll cross the lake, Duma!"

"But we do not have a ship!" Duma frowned now, and rubbed his flat nose with the backs of his fingers.

"I know. But we'll make one."

"How, *Inkosi*?"

John turned excitedly. "We'll make a raft, a big one, to carry all our gear and both of us as well. There are plenty of trees here. We can cut creepers and small branches for a floor."

"Ayi-ee!" exclaimed Duma. "A ship!"

He stood up, drew his cutlass, and felt the edge with his thumb. "Start, *Inkosi*!" He grinned.

They went to work with a will. John singled out

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eight trees, which were felled and shaped into fifteen-foot lengths. Two rectangles of logs were made and placed one on top of the other. He bound these together while Duma cut small saplings and laid them on the raft to form a floor.

Next morning, the contrivance was ready. John spat on his hands and rubbed them together. The raft lay about six feet from the water. It looked solid and well made.

"Right, Duma!" he called. "Let's launch it!"

The big Zulu grappled with one corner, John bent at the other.

"Ready! Heave!"

He felt his biceps jump as he flung his weight against the raft. His neck felt big and knotted as he strained. Duma's arms looked like young tree-trunks, his great muscles, rock-like under the skin.

The end of the raft seemed to budge a little. It sucked free from the wet sand. But John felt his strength ebbing fast. His breath burst from his lungs.

"Phew! It's no good, Duma! This thing's too heavy! We'll never shift it!"

"Try again, *Inken*," grunted the big Zulu. He bent and wrapped his great hands round a jutting log. But after three more efforts the raft was, if anything, stuck deeper than ever.

John thumped the palm of his hand in desperation. A whole day would be wasted if they were unable to launch it. He stepped back, hands on hips. His muscles felt stiff.

His foot suddenly shot from under him, and he

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landed, backwards, on the grass. The small log he had stepped on rolled until it ran against the side of the raft.

He felt a tremor of excitement. Rollers! Why hadn't he thought of that before? There were plenty of off-cuts lying around. They should do the trick!

"Quickly, Duma!" he cried, pointing to the off-cuts. "Let's trim these!"

While Duma worked on the logs, John cut and shaped two small saplings, and dragged these to the raft.

"Right, Duma, give me a hand."

Using the saplings as levers, he raised the raft while Duma rolled logs under her. It was a slow, laborious process—first one side, then the other—but at last it was done.

"Now!" he called, putting his shoulder to the raft. "Heave—heave—heave!"

The contrivance moved slowly, bumpily, over the rollers. "Again, Duma!"

His muscles strained. Then he felt the raft slip away from him and trundle with a splash into the lake.

He moored it to a tree growing near the bank and loaded the supplies. Walking unsteadily forward, he lifted one of his improvised levers and made a chopping movement. The rope which served as a mooring-line parted under a blow from the Zulu's cutlass.

John thrust down with all his weight and the raft glided slowly into the lake.

Astern, Duma kept poling, until John shouted: "No bottom here! We'll have to paddle now!" He bent

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backwards and picked up his paddle. It was roughly fashioned from a forked branch with thin saplings lashed across it to form a blade.

He squatted in the bows, feet trailing in the water as he paddled. Duma sat aft, working away steadily. He called out and pointed as the raft ambled slowly through the water.

"We'll see hippo soon, *Inkosi*, when we round that bank!"

John nodded, and pointed to their left. "What are those?"

The birds were long-legged, with pink-tipped wing feathers. Their large hooked beaks nuzzled the water as they prospected for food. John grinned to himself at the Zulu's reply. It was clear where Duma's thoughts lay.

"I don't know, *Inkosi*, but they are too big to eat!"

He dug his paddle in deeply as they swept the raft round the bend of the lake. His feet felt much better, trailing in the water like this. The hard miles behind had taken their toll. But now, the water eased them. He lifted one from the water and looked at it. He felt the wrinkled skin with his finger and thumb. Good, that blister on his heel had popped. A few more hours in the water, and his feet would be as good as ever.

He started, as a hoarse grunting rose up in front.

"Hippo!" shouted Duma.

The grey-green bodies of a hippo herd wallowed in the water, half submerged not fifty yards ahead. Their bulbous eyes stared at him.

"Keep away! Keep away! Don't go near them!"

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warned Duma, waving his hand to the left. John paddled hard on his left and slewed the raft away.

"Are they dangerous?"

"Best to be careful, *Inkosi*," replied Duma. "We are small—they are big!"

That afternoon they came close to a spit of land which jutted into the lake. Duma pointed to it.

"We shall camp there tonight," he called. "It looks a good place and perhaps we shall see geese later."

Duma was right. John was waiting when a large flock streaked overhead just as the sun was sinking behind the trees. He held his breath and aimed off at the rearmost bird. He heard a little *thunk* as the bullet hit home and the bird came tumbling down.

The Zulu wrapped the dead bird in damp clay and baked it in the fire. It was quite dark before they ate, sitting by the little fire, watching the broad sheen of the lake.

Next morning the rising sun melted the lake into a pool of gold as the raft nosed upstream. Under the thrust of the paddles it slipped quietly through the silence. The beasts were quiet after a night of hunting, and nothing moved as they dipped and swung steadily northwards.

Duma called from the stern, his voice suddenly loud in the morning air: "This ship has saved many days of our journey! See how the water stretches far to where we shall sleep tonight. We should have had to walk all the way round the lake to get there."

John gazed thoughtfully westwards. The Zulu was

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right. This lake had taken out a great bite of land. It looked hard country too. The land round here looked swamp-ridden. There was even a possibility of quick-sands.

"I think we have saved over three days in travel, *Inkosi*."

"It is just as well, Duma," replied John. "Even one or two days saved might make all the difference to the people back in the settlement."

He gritted his teeth with sudden determination. He *would* get the medicines. King, Somers and the rest *would* recover. And he would know how to deal with the fat Secretary when he returned.

His eyes concentrated on the shore again, and he only half saw the grey bulk that suddenly surfaced ahead. The logs tilted under him, and Duma yelled:

"Go right, *Inkosi*. Go right!"

John felt his stomach tighten. They had hit a hippo!

He dug his paddle desperately into the water, urging the unwieldy craft away from the great beast beneath.

"Look out!" shouted Duma

The hippopotamus, water streaming from his grey humped back, turned surprisingly swiftly and plunged after the raft. Red gashes showed in his back where the sharp logs had struck him as he lay sleeping below the surface. His mouth gaped, displaying four solid stumps of teeth.

John caught off-balance, sprawled backwards to grab his rifle. At that moment the beast's huge mouth closed on the side of the raft. He felt the logs dip under the assault. The sky reeled round him as he fell.

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The screams of the beast were deafening. He tugged the raft to and fro, trying to smash it. It tilted again, precariously. John, his hand clutching at the branch-floor, saw his rifle slip towards the water. Diving forward on his elbows, he made a frantic grab at the weapon.

The bellowing of the hippopotamus, close to his ears, echoed wildly across the lake. His heart thumped. The twin muzzles were in the water! He lunged wildly and felt his hand close over the butt.

He jerked it back and hunched to his knees as the hippopotamus took another crunching bite at the raft. Its eyes were red, enraged.

That massive mouth took a firmer grip. Strangled snorts blew through its distended nostrils, and the raft slid down under several tons of flesh.

"Shoot, *Inkosi*! Kill the devil!"

There was no time to aim. He shoved the rifle towards the menacing head and loosed off both barrels.

He experienced a paralysing blow in his ribs as the heavy gun kicked viciously back. Gun smoke swirled away and disclosed two black holes gaping in the animal's head. Twin fountains of smoke bubbled up and dribbled over the green hide.

The hippo coughed and dropped slowly back into the water.

John snatched a glance aft. Duma had spread-eagled his body over the packs. He had dug his hands and feet into the saplings of the floor. This timely action had saved their precious equipment from pitching into the lake.

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He disentangled himself and sat up. "Ay-i-ee!" he ejaculated. "Hau! What a beast that was! Look at it!"

The great hippopotamus sank slowly beneath the surface, bubbles streaming from its open mouth and nose.

John grunted. "Blame the look-out! I should have seen him." He reached for his powder-horn and began reloading. That was always the first thing to do.

Duma swayed forward and rearranged the packs. He pointed to the rifle and grinned. "Hau! That firestick is worth many men. If the army of Chaka had guns, what army could stand against them?"

John stiffened as he rammed a wad home. Duma's back was bent as he busied himself with the equipment. If Chaka's men had guns! John compressed his lips and concentrated on loading.

He kept the raft going till well after sunset. The last mile or so had seemed never-ending. Tired out, he leaned forward and gave a last thrust with his paddle. The raft grounded bumpily on the soft bank.

"Shall we sleep here, *Inkosi*?" Duma's voice came from the darkness.

"It will be best, Duma," replied John tiredly. He opened his pack and chewed on a lump of cold roast goose for a while. Duma's soft chanting ran across the water and into the trees.

John tossed the clean wing-bone into the lake. Duma never seemed to tire. He was always happy, always singing. His energy seemed boundless.

He kneaded a place in the pack for his head, then lay back on the branch-deck and fell asleep.

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Next morning they cut some saplings. John helped Duma drag the raft into the bank and make it fast to a tree. Then the Zulu covered it with the saplings.

"There," he said, stepping back. "That will keep it hidden. It will be waiting for us here when we return."

"Well done, Duma!" said John. From ten feet away the raft was almost invisible. He strapped on his equipment and led the way into the jungle that flanked the lake.

Later that morning, the trees thinned out, and he found himself tramping through a deep *donga*. The steep earth sides soaked up heat from the blazing sun and threw it fiercely out again. He ran a dry tongue over his lips.

"Is this the land of the Tongas, now?"

"Yes," answered Duma. "I have never been here before. But some of my people have seen this nation. They have spoken of their ways. These Tongas are Kaffirs."

"Kaffirs?"

"Yes. They eat fish."

"Don't you eat fish?"

"No true black man eats fish. Not even the Ama-Batnas!"

"But," protested John, "if you have never——"

He broke off as he felt Duma's hand tighten on his arm.

"Look!" exclaimed the Zulu in an awed voice.

On the sandy trail in front lay a huge heap of steaming dung. It smelled musky, odoriferous as John stepped up to it. The pile reached nearly to his middle.

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"What on earth—" he started.

"*Ndlovu*. Elephant."

"Close?"

"Yes."

He pushed his rifle between his knees, withdrew the light charges, rammed home double the powder he normally used, and topped it with a lead ball the size of a man's thumb.

The ramrod slipped back easily into its groove. He held the rifle at the trail and nodded his head as a sign that they would go on.

The trail through the *donga* curved and twisted. The red dust raised by John's shoes hung in the air, and stuck to the inside of his nose as he breathed. He plodded round the next buttress of earth and stiffened. He felt, rather than heard, Duuna's quick intake of breath at his side.

A loud yell echoed in the *donga* and a spear, ominously bound with red feathers, thudded into the earth at their feet.

There was a scrambling movement along the sides of the bank, and John caught his breath.

Barring the trail was a phalanx of hostile, painted faces.



CHAPTER SEVEN

* * *

The Witch of the Leopard Tribe

THE warriors in front gathered menacingly forward, their bare feet scuffling in the red dust and sunshine winking on their bright spears. Sweat cut little furrows as it ran down their ochre-claubed chests and arms.

John's calf-muscles grew iron-hard and his thumb splayed over the twin hammers of his rifle.

They halted, not twenty paces away. One, evidently the leader, swaggered to the front, his thin-ribbed chest heaving in the hot sun.

Leopard-skins hung from his sinewy middle, and round his knees and ankles he wore fringes of white fur. His wrists were encircled with bands of shiny copper, contrasting with the large pieces of white wood thrust through the distended lobes of his ears.

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His lips curled back and white teeth flashed in the red cavern of his mouth as he shouted. With every few words he thudded the haft of his spear into the dusty ground.

The men behind him chanted, and stamped their feet as he finished each sentence. The fine dust eddied and floated about, clinging to their bare, sweaty legs, covering them like grotesque, russet stockings.

John kept his thumb on the hammers, stared back at the leader, then turned his head.

"What does 'Leopard-skins' say? Can you understand him, Duma?"

The Zulu looked worried. His jaws were working nervously.

"His words are strange, *Inkon*. I will ask him if he speaks the language of my people." Duma rattled off something in Zulu.

As the leader answered in the same tongue John felt his pulses quicken. He put out a hand.

"We come in peace, O warrior," he cried in Zulu. "Why do you bar our path? We mean no harm. We wish but to travel through your land."

His words raised a chorus of "Haus!" from the tribesmen. 'Leopard-skins' sneered and he turned his half-lidded stare on Duma.

He shouted, "Why does the *umlungu* speak with the tongue of the Zulu? Why does he speak lies to me? I know he comes not in peace, but in war! He—and you who led him here—must die!"

He stamped his spear and the men behind him took up the chant: "Die! Die! Die!"

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"We have no thought of killing," replied Duma sternly. "We have come from a far country and travel in peace. Had my master wished, he could have killed you all with that great fire-stick he carries in his hand!"

"Fire-stick," sneered 'Leopard-skins.' He turned to his men, still speaking in Zulu. "This stranger speaks of a fire-stick! Are we children? We know fire comes not from a stick. He lies!"

The men surged forward as he exhorted them, and began slipping along both sides of the *donga*.

"They will kill us, *Inkosi*! They will kill us!" muttered Duma. "Look at their leader. He is mad!"

John narrowed a glance at the daubed warrior and felt a chill run through him as the sight he saw confirmed Duma's words.

The face in front was contorted with an unnatural rage. The wet lips slobbered and the thin frame shook.

This maniac would not listen to reason. But John was prepared to take one last chance. Every man was afraid of something.

He levelled his rifle.

"Are you a brave man, Chief?" He spat the words out intentionally, swinging the muzzles of his rifle until they rested on that thin chest in front. But 'Leopard-skins' ignored the shout and still stared at Duma.

"Son of a pig who wears the skin of a leopard! Coward in the garb of a warrior! I'm speaking to you!"

That did it. The leader jerked his head at this insult, his lips parted and he glowered in anger.

Now, thought John, I've stopped him, anyway!

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"Listen to me!" he cried. "If your men move, you die! Understand? You die first!" He patted the rifle meaningly.

The leader closed his mouth abruptly as he looked down and saw the rifle pointing at him. He took a step back.

John pushed his advantage.

"Get your men back! Get them back, quickly." He felt the ground tremble under his feet.

The leader glanced to left and right. He hesitated. "Hurry, Chief!"

The leader turned, his face a mask of fear and hate. A hush fell over the tribesmen. John felt the ground tremble again and he shifted his stance. The trembling increased and, suddenly, a tribesman shrieked.

Duma caught his breath and said: "*Inkosi!* Look!"

Round a red buttress of earth lurched a bull elephant!

The tribesmen yelled and scattered, trying to press their frightened bodies into the sides of the *donga*. The eyes of the mad man snapped wide, and foam flecked his working lips.

The elephant, his grey hide powdered with dust, poised on three legs, undecided. His wide ears flapped questingly as the grey head swayed from side to side. Suddenly he caught the scent and his trunk went up. Its trumpet-blast cut shrilly through the heat-soaked air. His feet thundered ponderously as he launched his great body into a charge.

'Leopard-skins' whirled, his bare brown arms reaching up defensively. John flung himself into the side of

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the *donga*. The elephant thundered down, and the tribesmen screamed as the trunk swooped and whirled 'Leopard-skins' on high.

John steadied his rifle. Sweat from his forehead ran into his eyes, blurring his vision.

"In the eye, *Inkosi*! In the eye!" Duma shouted wildly.

But the target looked desperately small even though the great head was now only fifteen feet away. The foresight lost its sharpness and dissolved into a smudgy blur. His fingers tightened on the double triggers and took first pressure. A reddened eye appeared over the muzzles.

The mad-man's screams were drowned in the explosion.

Eyeing the beast, John reloaded frantically. The ramrod slipped in his sweaty fingers and his breath choked in his chest as he rammed the last wad home.

Gun-smoke drifted down the *donga*. The elephant's trunk grew slack. Blood poured from a great hole in its head. The heavy knees buckled and 'Leopard-skins' dropped in the dust.

Half-dazed, he shook himself and tried to get up. Then his mouth opened in a piercing scream as the dying elephant shuddered and collapsed drunkenly on him.

The sides of the *donga* reverberated. Chunks of dried earth flaked off and tumbled in the dust. The elephant breathed heavily through its trunk and a hind leg kicked nervously, then flopped.

The shadow of a bird swung across the ground. No

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one moved. Blood from the elephant ran in little trickles down its tusks and dropped into the hot sand.

One of the tribesmen, braver than his fellows, stepped cautiously forward and pricked the creased hide of the beast. Emboldened by the lack of response, he pricked again, deeper this time, and then looked up wonderingly. His Zulu sounded halting, clipped:

"The elephant is dead."

Duma's voice was harsh. "True, O Tonga! The Lord of the Forest is dead. He has killed your leader. Yet my master slew him as if he were a small buck. Nothing can withstand the magic of my master's fire-stick. Beware lest he kill you all!"

The tribesman shrank back, turned and ran to his fellows. They stood huddled in consultation for a while. Then, weapons lowered, they came slowly forward.

"Lord," they called, "command us and we will obey."

"We wish to travel in peace," rapped John, struggling to keep the tremor from his voice. "See that it is so!"

"We will lead the way, Lord, to our dwelling. There we will feast and tell of the wonder you have accomplished this day."

John nodded his head and the tribesmen led the way.

A hard day's march ended at the edge of a forest. A camp was set up for the night. While the Tongas chanted round their camp-fires, Duma, a lump of boiled maizebread in his hand, talked quietly.

"I don't trust them, *Inkosi!*"

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John frowned. "Why not?" he asked quietly.

"I have heard them speak. They say you have great medicine. They also say with you as their leader no tribe could stand against them."

"What do they mean, Dum.?"

"I'm not sure, *Inkosi*. But once we are at the kraal, maybe they will not let us depart. It might even be worse."

"Worse?"

"Yes, *Inkosi*. I have told you that we believe much in magic. These people, too, will believe in this mighty medicine. They will believe that if they eat of part of an enemy they become stronger than the enemy. Also, if they eat part of a magician, they, too, will be able to accomplish much magic. I fear their witch-doctors will covet your magic."

"But, Duma," John shuddered, "surely they wouldn't . . ."

"They would, *Inkosi*. If they believe as I say, they will eat you."

He stared dully into the crackling camp-fire. The Tongas talked in low voices among themselves where they squatted, about ten yards away. The cough of a lion sounded close in the darkness. One of the tribesmen threw a few more logs on the fires. The flames blazed up and, in the light, John saw them huddle closer together. He waited for them all to curl up before he, himself, lay back and went to sleep.

They broke camp early next morning. John frowned to himself as he puzzled over Duma's words. It seemed fantastic! Yet, he told himself, these people really were

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savages—Stone-Age men. It was quite possible that they held such strange beliefs.

He noticed the few peculiar glances thrown towards him and Duma as they marched along. He also saw that now they never left him alone with his companion. A bare-chested warrior was always present.

The march went steadily on throughout the blazing day, past a small range of hills and into a thick forest. They slept in the forest that night.

Late the next morning as they breasted a rock-strewn ridge, the warriors in front stopped. They pointed and shouted excitedly.

Their kraal was a small collection of bee-hive huts on a circular plain. Crowds of natives rushed out to greet the returning tribesmen. They stopped in full cry when they saw John, and gaped in wonder at his white skin and gun he carried on his shoulders.

One of the men barked an order. A red-skinned woman came forward, and John and Duma followed her to a hut.

The interior was gloomy and oppressively hot. John felt his way gingerly to the back. He slipped off his pack and rifle, and squatted on the earth floor near Duma.

Suddenly he heard singing. It seemed to come from many voices and was rhythmical, chanting.

A single high-pitched yell was followed by the stamp of feet outside the hut.

Duma moved restlessly at his side. "I will see what that noise means, *Inkosi*."

He crawled to the front of the hut and stuck his head

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outside. John heard him talking. A gruff voice answered.

John pressed forward, but Duma's hand came back and he felt it push against his shoulder. "What is it, Duma? What's happening out there?"

"Two men! They guard the entrance. They would not let me pass, *Inkosi*. We are prisoners!"

"Prisoners! This is madness," gritted John. "I'm not going to die here like a pig in a cave. I've got the rifle, you are armed. Can't we do something?"

"How, *Inkosi*? There will be many others outside."

"Cut down the guards and dash for the forest "

"Right *Inkosi*!"

John turned on his knees and reached out in the darkness for his rifle. His hands patted over the earth floor. He had left the rifle at the back of the hut. But—

"Duma! The rifle! It's gone!"

The Zulu groped beside him, his voice suddenly tense.

"Feel here, *Inkosi*, at the back of the hut. There! The wall is loose. They took the gun while we watched at the entrance."

John felt his knees buckle. There seemed nothing they could do. His hand closed over the hilt of his cutlass, when he heard a voice call from outside the hut. A warrior beckoned from the entrance. John hesitated a second. Then he jerked his head to Duma and scrambled into the open.

The assembled warriors of the Tongas were ranged in a circle round the hut. Their spears and the copper bands round their wrists and ankles sparkled in the

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sun. John's heart gave a bound as he saw the revolting object in their midst.

It stood alone on the hard earth compound like some misshapen spirit from the dead. The thing approached and he felt a shudder of horror run through him.

A woman!

Squat and fat, the female in front rocked to and fro, mumbling softly to herself. Her legs were wrapped with the entrails of some animal, filled with fat and blood. Her stiff hide-petticoat was embroidered with huge teeth. Round her middle twined snake skeletons, medicine bladders, roots and little buck-horns.

Her gross body was tattooed all over and smeared with black earth. Round her neck were more stuffed entrails and down her back hung a leopard's skin with the grinning head cunningly masked over her face.

Her hair was long, smeared with some vile-smelling ointment, and from the open mouth of the leopard's head stuck a huge stuffed snake!

John felt the ridges of his stomach contract as she shuffled along slowly towards him. His nose twitched and he swallowed hard, as her rank smell eddied across the compound. Duma's voice was trembling with fear.

"*Inkosi! Inkosi!* The chieftainess! The great witch-woman . . ."

John clamped his teeth together to steady his nerves before speaking. "To an *umlungu* she is as nothing!" he snapped. The words were harsh. But he knew they had to be. Duma sounded near the end of his tether. "See, Duma, I will—" He broke off, his eyes wide. From behind her back, the female witch-doctor pro-

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duced a long object—his rifle! His heart sank.

He flinched as he saw her point it at him, and heard her speaking in sing-song Zulu, for his benefit, he supposed.

"My son is dead! My son who was the Chief, is dead! You, white man, are the cause. By your magic you summoned the elephant that killed my son!"

So, that maniac was her son!

The voice droned on and he strained his ears to catch her mumbled phrases

The sun blazed down on the little compound. The rank smelling being before him moved as she spoke, setting the buck horns and teeth rattling, and the snake's head swaying ominously above her head

The assembled men let out a pent-up 'Ha' as she intoned her accusation and sentence.

"Once the great elephant had completed its work you took your stick of magic and slew it!" Her voice rose to a scream "But now, white man, I have your great fire-stick! You are powerless and will die."

"Die! Die! Die!" chanted the tribesmen, lifting their knees and stamping their bare feet in unison.

John beat down the fear welling up in him. He narrowed his eyes at the rifle. Now was the time for boldness! Now or never! Chin high, he threw out his arm and shouted:

"Magic! You think you have magic? No magic is as strong as mine! Make the fire-stick obe, . Make it kill me." He folded his arms across his chest. "I wait, old woman."

Duma was openly sobbing behind him, now.

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"Careful! Careful, *Inkosi*. She will turn us into beasts of the field. She has great magic! O *Inkosi*, be careful."

The woman lifted the gun and mumbled into it. Then she thrust it passionately towards John. Thrust it again and again.

But the rifle was harmless. Both the hammers were down and still had to be cocked.

The waiting tribesmen were silent. John felt something hard and round in his shirt-pocket as he stood there in the heat, his arms crossed. He fingered it and his heart thudded, almost choking him. He glanced at the witch. She glared back maliciously.

Putting his hand to his pocket he walked up to her. The smell was terrible. He fought back his revulsion and saw her eyes blaze at his temerity. She shrank away as he pointed, then swept his hand to the waiting tribe.

"Well!" he shouted, his voice a trifle unsteady. "Am I dead? Am I now a beast, perhaps?" He glared at them. "Well—am I?"

A low murmur rippled round the expectant gathering. He had them guessing now!

He could feel it. He must not stop! His arm pointed up: "Look now! All of you! See the magic of the White Man! I will pluck fire from the Heavens!"

He marched slowly to his hut, conscious of the eyes on him. He reached up and tore a handful of thatch from the roof. The stuff felt as dry as tinder.

The burning glass was steady, the sun blazing. In the circle once more, he concentrated the rays on the bit of thatch. It smoked. The tribesmen moved back,

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eyes wide, as John breathed on the tinder and it burst into flame.

An awed cry echoed in the dusty compound.

He crossed swiftly to the hut and threw the bit of burning thatch on the roof. Seconds later, a red tongue of flame swept up, feeding greedily on the sun-dried grass.

"Beware!" he yelled against the crackle and roar of the burning hut. "Beware, lest I destroy you all in this manner!"

He sprang at the moaning witch and jerked the rifle from her. She shuffled away in fear, and the tribesfolk murmured, their voices like the humming of bees. Somewhere a child cried in fright.

"Duma!" called John tersely. "Be quick!"

The Zulu grabbed up the packs which lay at his feet.

"They're frightened now!" snapped John, looking round, "but I don't trust her!" He nodded at the witch. "She'll whip them into a frenzy soon enough. Come on."

The warriors hesitated, then moved aside as John thrust a way through their ranks. He heard Duma panting behind him. Ahead lay a gentle slope that led away from the village to open country.

The wailing of the Tongas echoed up this rise as he pressed purposely forward, the dry ground breaking into a dusty path under his shoes. His body was tense, waiting for the cry of pursuit. But the hill was silent.

Duma kept quiet for the first few miles. Looking back, John saw him bent under his pack, the usual good-natured expression gone from his face. He rubbed

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a hand over his chest. The Zulu looked worried. It was not like him to be like that. Still, that business at the kraal was enough to unsettle anyone!

John clamped his jaw as he felt the long, hard miles take their toll of his back and leg muscles. His shoes felt as if they had split on the stony ground. He kicked aside a stone in the path. He should have remembered to bring another pair with him. These were ship's shoes—quite suitable for deck work but useless for this hard country.

Every now and again he glanced back for signs of pursuit, but the brown ridges and plains were bare. As he cut a creeper from the path he heard Duma call him.

John stopped and rested on his rifle. "Hard going, Duma?"

The Zulu's eyes suddenly cleared and he smiled. John felt a little quiver of relief. That was better. Duma looked more like his old self when he smiled.

"That was great magic with the fire, *Inkosi*! Can all *umlungus* pluck fire from the sky like that?"

John looked up. "The fire, Duma? Yes, they can. Tomorrow, when the sun is high, I will show you."

"Hau! Pluck fire from the sky! Then I, too, will be a magician!"

Duma lifted once more his sticks and spears. His chest bulged proudly as he strode along. John turned his head to look at him. The Zulu was a fine chap. Strong as a lion, brave, unceasing. He could not have wished for a better companion in this dark land.

Away in the blue distance loomed a range of mountains. Their sharp summits blocked the horizon. They

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looked precipitous and darkly forbidding.

John jerked his head in their direction.

"Will there be a pass, do you think?"

His companion narrowed his eyes and looked thoughtfully at those peaks in front. He rubbed his chin as they walked and it was some seconds before he replied.

"I don't know, *Inkosi*. I have not been this far before, nor do I know of any man who has travelled in this land. But I heard the Tongas speak of them when we lay in the hut."

"What did they say?"

"They called them the Leopard Mountains. No man of their tribe will go near them. They are the haunt of leopards and said to be accursed.

"Accursed?"

"So they said, *Inkosi*. Those Tongas hold the leopard in great fear. Even the witch had the skin on her body."

"Did you fear the magic of that witch?"

"Yes, *Inkosi*. She has great powers. Of that I am sure."

"Why do you say that, Duma?"

"Did you not see her face, *Inkosi*?"

"Yes. Well, only her eyes, really. The rest was covered by the leopard's skin."

Duma's voice took on a strange note. "When you turned with your fire-magic, *Inkosi*, I saw her. I saw her whole face." His voice dropped.

John frowned. "What did you see, Duma?"

"On her face were no lips, *Inkosi*. The nose was only

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a great hole under the head of the leopard. I feared her, not because of her face, but because she had no face at all!"

"No face?" John's thoughts shrank from the gruesome image conjured up by the Zulu's description. "Why? Why should this be so?"

"Proof of her magic, *Inkosi*. Proof she had been sacrificed as a girl. Portions of her face had been severed while she lived. It is a custom in Africa. Many undergo this, but few survive. I have heard tales of these great witches. Now I have seen one!"

"But why should she have been sacrificed? What would that——"

"Those who survive are under the protection of the evil spirits."

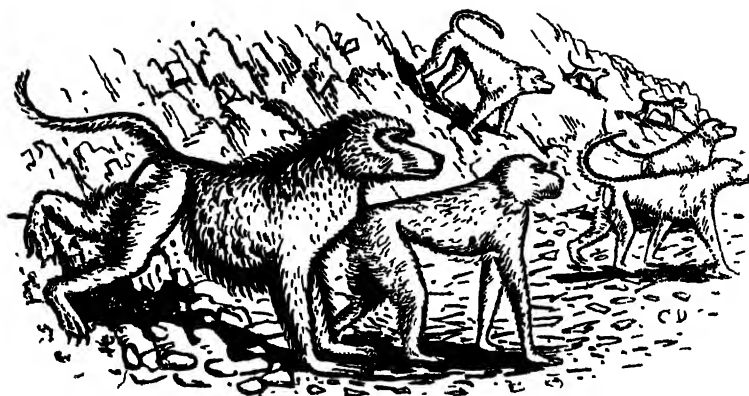
John thought this over in silence. He was about to ask more when he heard Duma's warning cry: "Careful here, *Inkosi*!"

He felt his feet sink into the muddy bank of a small river. The Zulu poked cautiously in front with a spear. The ground seemed firm. Satisfied, he led the way through any quicksands which might have lain underfoot.

His legs stained brown by the river, John hacked his way through the forest bordering the bank, and struck into the foot-hills of the mountain range. The sun was sinking as they reached the boulder-strewn slopes.

The peak loomed high above, brooding, ominous.

An inhuman scream suddenly rent the night stillness. The rocky slopes hurled the echo down. A stone flew from the blackness and thudded at John's feet.



CHAPTER FIGHT

* * *

In Mountain Country

JOHN leaped back, cocking the rifle, his eyes straining into the blackness above. The harsh echo of that terrible scream rolled wildly about the jagged mountain. Rumbling sounds echoed in the night as smaller rocks bounced and thudded around them.

"Back, *Inkosi!*" shouted Duma. "Back to the trees."

John was moving as the Zulu shouted. He heard more boulders thundering down the slopes as, crouching defensively, he blundered back. A tree loomed up out of the darkness. He leaned, breathless, against its wide trunk and heard Duma panting beside him. "Are there people up there, do you think, Duma?" The words tumbled from his lips.

"I don't know, *Inkosi,*" came Duma's guarded reply.

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"At first I thought so, but now. . . ." His voice trailed off into silence.

"Then who threw those rocks?"

"I think it was the monkey people."

"Monkeys?"

"No, *Inkos*. These are bigger than forest monkeys. They live in the mountains and bark like dogs. Baboons, *Inkon*, the prey of the leopard."

"Baboons! Why should they throw rocks at me?"

"They heard us. In the dark they must have thought we were leopards. Those stones were meant to kill!"

"Will they come down here?"

"No. They will stay in the mountain. It is their home."

John breathed out slowly and uncocked his rifle. It was useless attempting the ascent in the darkness. Even if they passed the baboons safely, the leopards would still be there hunting.

"Then we had better camp here, tonight, Duma," he said. "Tomorrow we shall climb."

The night air was chill. It cut through his ragged shirt and he huddled nearer to the dying embers of the fire. The food was finished and his stomach felt empty and flat. He put out a hand and pulled his rifle closer.

Suddenly he shivered. His thoughts turned almost involuntarily to the warmth and comfort of his small London home, and he wondered if he would ever see it again. Ever since he could remember he had shared a home with his sister, Janet, and her good-natured husband, Charlie Brett. Charlie was a printer by trade, and John looked upon him almost as his father. His

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real father he could scarcely remember, but his sister had often told him how, in the summer of 1814, he had gone to defeat Napoleon at his last stand at Waterloo.

The battle had been won, but Sergeant Stephen Ross, of the First Foot Guards, had fallen in the charge.

He jerked his thoughts back to the present with an effort. The stillness of the night was broken by Duma's heavy breathing. John raised himself on one elbow to see the big Zulu fast asleep with his spears close beside him.

John settled himself in a more comfortable position, but it seemed a long time before he followed his companion's example.

The morning was overcast and brought rain with it. The water drizzled steadily, turning the soft earth under-foot into a slippery morass.

His first thought was for his weapons. He tore off several pieces of oiled cloth and wrapped them round the breech mechanism of his rifle and two pistols. He gave the mouthpiece of his powder horn an extra twist to make sure it was really water-tight. Then he wound the remainder of the cloth round it.

His powder and weapons cared for, he felt ready to make the ascent.

Duma stowed the tin coffee-cups in his pack and strapped on his equipment. The wet earth sucked at every step, and they both slipped several times. John's knees were barked and raw before he reached the craggy granite of the mountain itself.

Rain had turned the rock-face into a slippery wall, devoid of hand-holds and bristling with tiny splinters

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of granite. By the time he had climbed a hundred feet his hands were a mass of scratches and bled freely at every agonised effort.

His pack seemed to drag him back. He pulled forward and up, the barrels of his rifle clinking as he fought for every hand-hold on the sheer face.

On his left he could hear Duma's laboured breathing as the Zulu slapped his hands against the granite, feeling for a hand hold.

John reached upwards and felt a cleft in the rock. He took the strain and heaved, biceps and forearms bulging. His shoes kicked and scraped against the slippery wall. Then his left foot found a splinter of rock.

He rested on his elbows, then straightened his leg and dragged himself upright, bare chest and stomach scraping on the granite. At last he was able to wedge both his feet in the cleft.

The rain lessened and ceased, and a sparkle of sunshine ripped a ragged hole in the clouds.

John stared, unable to believe his eyes.

"Duma!" he yelled. "There's a pass here! A pass!"

He bent, caught hold of the Zulu's sweating wrist and hauled. He got one foot in the cleft. John heaved again and Duma flopped at his side in a heap of gravel. John gripped his arm excitedly as they peered through the narrow gap in the rock.

A slim valley ran across the mountain like a green saddle on a huge grey horse. Its sides were steep, overhanging and rocky. At the end was a small hump. He slapped his hand on the rock beside him. It seemed

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too good to be true. Once across it, the worst of their ascent would be over.

Duma following, he edged his way through the narrow cleft. Small stones at the end, near the opening, clattered under his broken shoes. He slipped once, but got up and jumped the last few feet. He felt the rifle thud painfully on his back.

The grass was soft—a cushion for his burning feet. Duma pointed to the end of the valley.

"A day's march, *Inkosi*! A day's march and we will see the sea!" A wide smile spread over his face. He grinned. "The spirits watch over you, *Inkosi*."

Soon the climbing sun beat mercilessly down. The grass lost its moisture under the fierce heat and became brittle and slippery. John looked back and saw they were more than half-way down the valley.

He ran a dry tongue over his mouth and his hand went to his water-bottle. He stopped, threw his head back, and put it to his lips. The cool liquid slipped down his parched throat and he drank with his eyes closed. The water seemed to flow to his very finger-tips, quenching the parched cells of his body.

He took the bottle away reluctantly, and started to push the stopper back. The heat cut mercilessly through his shirt. He started to replace the bottle, when his forehead corrugated into a frown, and he rubbed a hand across his eyes.

"What is wrong, *Inkosi*?"

He pointed silently to the steep cliffs flanking the sides of the valley.

"What is it, *Inkosi*? I see nothing!"

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"Keep looking," rapped John tensely. "Look! Look now! The whole cliff's moving!"

Through the heat-haze swirling off the grass, a range of boulders shifted on the slope.

"*Inkosi!*"

John jumped round. The other side was moving as well!

"What is it?"

"Baboons, *Inkosi!*" came the ominous reply. "Like the sands on the shore."

His skin prickled as silent ranks of grey baboons crept forward on both sides. What had looked like a movement of boulders had been the sharp-featured dog-heads of these creatures. They looked like neither man nor beast.

He struggled to keep his voice calm. "Will they attack us?"

Duma's hand tightened on his stabbing spear. "I do not know, *Inkosi*. Let us keep walking slowly. Do not run. Any quick movement will set them on us!"

The loathsome grey army crept along the sides of the valley, keeping pace in sinister silence. They were close enough for him to make out hundreds of sharp, hostile eyes. Their long grey arms looked sinewy and powerful. The hands were grotesque and strong enough to rip out a man's throat in seconds.

But now the valley narrowed abruptly. Its rugged sides merged sharply into two sheer cliffs where not even a baboon could cling. The grass, which had looked so green and inviting from afar, was now knee-high, and brown with the sun's blistering heat.

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A hot wind blew down the valley towards the tall peak which rose far behind the baboons.

John stifled an impulse to whirl round as, from the corner of his eyes he glimpsed them, in twos and threes, springing lightly down as they reached the cliffs. Their ranks thickened as they scuttled along, the dry grass rustling horribly under their feet.

They edged closer all the time. A cautious glance showed the leader, a large male, not twenty feet away. John jumped as this leader grunted and barked sharply.

A low growl spread through the heaving mass behind. John turned about and faced them. They stopped. One or two shambled in front, heads thrusting forward. But the bull snarled at them and they leaped backwards, hands and feet flat on the ground.

The leader stared unwinking, his eyes intent and blazing with the hunt.

John bit his lip and put a cautious hand to his powder-horn. Eyeing the leader, he gave the horn and both pistols to Duma. As he told the Zulu what to do, the big baboon, tail high, grunted and looped forward a pace.

Duma expelled his breath as he took the weapons. John heard him moving behind. The eyes of the leader flickered as he tried to keep the Zulu in sight. His lips wrinkled back over long dog-teeth.

Suddenly Duma shouted and the baboon, black-nailed hands outstretched, leaped.

John glimpsed a gaping mouth over his barrels and a grey screaming mass behind. His rifle bellowed, almost drowning the two pistol-shots that followed each

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other in quick succession. He felt heat at his back.

He fired again, blindly into them this time. He could hear crackling behind him. Then a pair of hands reached through the gun-smoke, grabbed his ankles, and held like a vice.

Straining every muscle, he tore his leg free and brought the rifle-butt down on the snarling head. He felt bone crunch and the baboon screamed. Smoke eddied round the enraged animals.

Clutching his hat to his face, he screwed his eyes shut and dashed back into the flames. He flinched and caught his breath as a tongue of fire seared his bare leg. More flames leaped before him, then he was through, black cinders cracking under his shoes.

His breath coursed through his lungs as he watched the fire. Duma had sprinkled gun-powder across the narrow pass. Two pistol-shots had kindled it and turned the dry grass into a consuming conflagration.

The wind fanned the fire before it on to the massed ranks of the baboons. They screamed and beat their hands at the flames. Those in front pushed frantically at those behind—anything to get away from the fire.

But the brittle grass was now a furnace of torture. The fire swept ferociously on, driving the baboons back like grey fluff before a broom.

John winced. One animal beat its arms helplessly in the air then raced along screaming as fire ran up its back, turning it into a living torch. Another plucked wildly at its burning fur, yelling horribly until it disappeared into the smoke.

John forgot the pain of his seared leg. He averted his

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face It was horrible Screams dinned through the valley like the rending cries of souls in torment, and harsh grass smoke billowed up in choking clouds

He wiped his streaming face with a shaking hand and looked at Duma The tall Zulu seemed unmoved as he stood brushing the grey ash from his arms and legs

John opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head 'I never thought it would be like that I just thought it would frighten them away'

He looked up when he felt Duma press his arm

'Here are the pistols, *Inkosi*'

John looked down dumbly He took the pistols and thrust them into his belt

'But Duma—' His voice felt choked

"What else could you do *Inkosi*? They would have killed us Now we are still alive to get the medicines for the settlement We did right *Inkosi*"

Duma pointed down a bush-studded path that wound round the end of the valley 'Once we get down there we will be safe'

John nodded, and stumbled after Duma along the mountain path They stopped at a sheltered patch under an overhanging rock John recharged his pistols and rifle in silence

'I saw two leopards leap near here *Inkosi*,' volunteered Duma "Where there are leopards no baboon will dare to go"

John screwed up his eyes It seemed to him that he could still see those animals screaming and running in the fire

The sun poured a flush into the western sky and

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then darkness settled like a cool blanket over the mountain. There was no water near and he did not feel like risking the dangers of this jagged place to search for it in the darkness.

He edged closer to the small blaze which Duma had made. The coffee was harsh and tasted of smoke. He moved as Duma put more sticks on the fire. The heat irritated the long burnt patch on his shin.

Duma pushed his open hands towards the fire as a cold wind soughed through the rocks. "Tomorrow, *Inkosi*," he murmured. "Tomorrow!"

"What about tomorrow, Duma?" John patted a water-soaked rag on his shin.

"The sea, *Inkosi*! Tomorrow we will see it!"

Eighteen days out! John half-closed his eyes. Eighteen days! His limbs and torso were scarred and battered with his fight over this unrelenting country. His back ached and the muscle of his right leg seemed hard as a pistol-butt under its covering of burnt skin.

He felt as if he could sleep for a week. But he knew when morning came his body would respond to the urgent summons from his brain. For there was no time to lose. Not if the men at the settlement were to survive.

The fire spurted little dying flames then sank back into a red glow. John felt for a comfortable place on his pack and fell back. The burn on his leg throbbed. He fell asleep with his hands tightly clenched.

The morning dawned grey and sullen. A thick mist clung to the valley of the mountain like the grimy skirts of some monstrous old woman. Both water and food were finished now.

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John licked his lips and felt the emptiness in his stomach as he looped his arms through the straps of his pack. How he longed for something to drink and something to eat. Anything! Even a mouldy ship's biscuit!

His shoes slipped badly on the mountain path. Round stones dug through the tattered soles and he winced as they bruised his feet, making each step a torture. He would have to do something about them. In their present state he would not be able to cover another mile of country like this.

"The mountain is hard," grunted Duma. Even in the Zulu's horny feet, cracks were beginning to show.

"If only I could bind them with something," gritted John, scrambling down. "They feel as if they're on fire."

The grey sky melted away and the sun blazed down in its full intensity. His mouth parched and his feet aching, he tottered beside Duma. He could no longer lift his feet. They just dragged along, stubbing painfully into the stones of the path.

Grey mountain dust clouded up as he trailed forward. It polluted the air. It was breathed in and clung chokingly to throat and nostrils. Duma's eyes were red-rimmed and his lips puffy in the intolerable heat.

"We must find water, *Inkosi*. We must find water!" he muttered hoarsely. Yet, looking round on this sun-baked mountain, John could see nothing that gave even a promise of water. All around lay the dust, grey, volcanic and lifeless.

He reeled on. The weight of his pack and rifle seemed to grow heavier with every step. He bent for-

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ward to ease the burden, and let his arms hang limply down as he shuffled through the thick dust.

His head sagged. The path seemed to rise and fall under him. All feeling suddenly fled his left side and the weight of his pack disappeared. The sky swung up, higher and higher.

"*Inkosi! Inkosi!* Are you all right?"

Duma's voice seemed to come from far away. John stared up from where he lay, sprawled in the dust. The throbbing was back now, intensified. His elbow ached where he had knocked it against a sharp stone and he felt the rifle digging into his back.

He pushed a hand into the dust and got to one knee, shaking his head as he tried to concentrate.

"What happened?"

"You fell, *Inkosi!*"

He felt Duma's hands grab his pack-straps and haul him upright.

"Come, *Inkosi*. Not much farther now!" Duma pulled the heavy pistols out. "Let me carry these. They are heavy and you are tired." He pushed the weapons into his pack. "I can smell water, *Inkosi*. It must be near here."

John swayed to his feet. He chewed his lips as the torture of walking began all over again. He lost count of distance. The mountain was a brittle grey around him, and he walked like a man in a dream.

The pace quickened. Duma's head was thrust forward, his mouth and nostrils gaping wide, like a hunting dog.

The path jolted downwards over huge boulders and

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massive heaps of granite. It leaped over the grey dust, passed it, and reached red earth. The ground underfoot felt softer. They blundered round a slab of rock and Duma pointed.

In the shallow hollow of a black boulder shone a pool of water. It glinted in the sunlight and a heat-haze eddied up from its surface in little shimmering curls.

John, walking like a machine, drove his legs forward. He swayed. The pool seemed ages away. It came forward then retreated. However much he struggled he just could not get any nearer! His body shook with the strain. His legs felt weak, jelly-like, unable to support his weight.

He staggered forward. The rock was moving in the heat. Suddenly it swelled upwards and he felt water splashing on his burnt face.

Moisture seeped into every crevice of his taut skin, into his red rimmed eyes and up his dust-clogged nose. He bent over it, gasped and lowered his head into the water again. He sucked it, gargled and swilled it round his parched mouth. Duma grunted and bubbled in the pool at his side.

He felt better again. The water was soothing and he found fresh strength in his body. Duma still had his face in the pool. Droplets of water sparkled in the light as he pulled out his woolly head and shook it.

"Hau, *Inkosi*! Now we can fill our bottles and walk. Oh, ho!" He splashed his hand in the pool. John grinned sideways at him.

This pool had saved their lives. They had just reached it in time. Without the water they would both

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have stumbled on to die in the grey mountain, sightless and blackened in the heat. John shuddered as he imagined himself lying exhausted, unable to move another step, with only the red-necked vultures for company.

"Ready, *Inkosi*!"

He splashed more water in his face. It was time to move.

"Right."

A gargling sounded behind. John raised his head and he saw Duma's hand tighten on the rock-edge. The Zulu's eyes widened.

A long snarl ripped out as John turned. His heart somersaulted wildly.

A spotted head sunk between two sinewy shoulders glared from fifteen feet away. The two forepaws were tensed, their white claws dug into the earth. Smooth muscles bunched where the hindquarters sat close to the ground. A study of boundless energy awaiting release.

The leopard's tail switched silently to and fro as it stared balefully at them with round, glowing eyes.

John's hand crept to his rifle strap.

The tail switched faster as Duma murmured quietly. The eyes never blinked.

"As soon as you can, *Inkosi*. He'll spring any—NOW!" Duma yelled.

The hindquarters snapped straight. There was barely time to aim. John glimpsed black rosettes rippling against a tawny skin, then felt the shock of his rifle.

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He flung himself sideways, twisting from the claws. The leopard coughed as it thudded on the rock. Water splashed and scattered in the air. Spitting and snarling, it whirled, shaking the brilliant drops from its black whiskers. John felt his stomach grow cold. He had missed!

The sculptured head swung and the hind legs tensed again.

John's hand went automatically to his belt, then dropped to his side. The pistols were in Duma's pack. He stared helplessly at the beast poised on the rock.

"Your knife, *Inkosi*!"

Duma's closed fist went back as the tawny head swung towards the sound. John weighted his knife-blade between finger and thumb. The leopard straightened and Duma flung his handful of gravel at its face.

The beast checked in mid-spring, paws lashing at the irritation in its eyes. John steadied. His knife flickered and he heard the thud as it buried itself in the leopard's neck.

The beast came down snarling on its hind legs, the knife protruding from its neck. It whirled, roaring in pain, and Duma hurled his stabbing spear.

The mouth gaped and its lips wrinkled back. Standing on its hind legs, the leopard mowed the air, blood seeping through its mouth. It gave a convulsive jerk and dropped.

John picked up his rifle and leaned it against the rock. He walked over, pulled his knife from the leopard, wiped it and sheathed it.

The animal lay still, a red, wet pool widening round

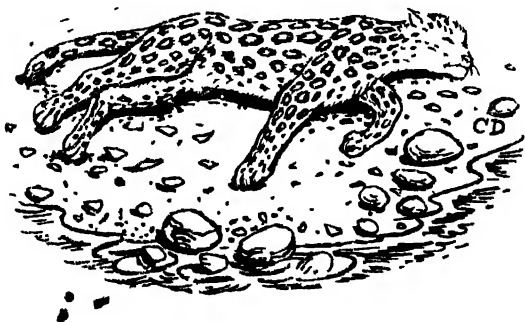
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its perfectly formed head. Its eyes were closed, and the black rosettes were now motionless on the yellow hide. The stiff black whiskers were spattered with red sand and death had sheathed the claws.

John swallowed hard. He cleaned and loaded his rifle in silence. He only half-heard Duma's exultant shout as he strapped on his pack.

"Look, *Inkosi!* Over there!"

John shaded his eyes against the glare and looked over the hot blue hills of Africa. His heart began to pound. His throat felt constricted and, for a moment, he could not trust himself to speak. . . .





CHAPTER NINE

* * *

A Pathetic Caravan

STRETCHING like a fine hairline across the hill tops was the sea at last! That winking line of light was a pointer to the journey's end. John felt his breath come faster.

"How long do you think now, Duma?"

"Two to three days, *Inkosi*. That forest past those hills will slow our march, but once through it, we shall be on the coast. Then we should see the great river that runs into Delagoa Bay—the one *Inkoos* Somers spoke of."

John jerked his pack-straps tighter. Five days only! A week at the outside and they would be at the Portuguese settlement. He shot a quick glance over the terrain ahead. It did not look too hard.

"Come on, Duma," he cried, "let's make a move."

A Pathetic Caravan

He took a step forward and almost cried out. The pain from his feet flooded angrily up, numbing his knees and sending his teeth down hard on his lip. He tried another step, but stiffened. Despair drove out exultation as he realised he could not walk.

"What is wrong, *Inkosi*?"

He swallowed hard. "It's—it's my feet. I'd better have a look at them."

He sat down and examined his shoes. The soles had been ripped completely off, leaving his lacerated feet open to the earth. Dried blood was caked between his toes and as he bent his right leg, he winced. The burned skin was puckered and split, and showed angry flesh beneath. He touched the patch and drew back his hand hurriedly.

"It's no good, Duma. Just look at them!"

"Let me see, *Inkosi*," Duma slipped off his pack and knelt down. He looked dolefully at the ruined shoes and examined John's bleeding feet. John felt his hand near the burn.

Duma pointed to it. "We can put some clay on here, *Inkosi*, to protect it from the sun. It should heal after a few days. He scratched his woolly head. "But your feet are very bad! Haul!"

"We can't stop now, Duma," cried John. "We can't wait for them to get better! Isn't there something we can bind them with? Can't we——"

"I do not know, *Inkosi*," answered Duma slowly. "As you have seen, no people here wear these shoes."

The Zulu was right, thought John. The black people of Africa walked barefooted. They knew nothing of

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shoes or clothes. They did not even wear woven cloth—only skins about their middles.

He turned his head.

The leopard still lay lifeless by the rock. Leopard-skin! It might work.

"Duma, that leopard! Drag it over here."

Duma seized the animal by its hind legs and lugged it along. John slipped out his knife, took hold of the soft stomach and made a long cut.

"Right," he cried, tugging at the furry belly. "Pull!"

The skin tore smoothly. Soon he held up two pieces. "There! That's what I wanted."

Duma pulled the beast away and he got to work. His hands were soon crawling with fleas. He beat the skin against the ground to rid them of vermin then brushed his hands hurriedly together.

His shoes came off slowly, painfully. He wiped his feet with a piece of cloth Duma had wetted in the pool, then wrapped the skins around them—first his left foot, then his right, furry side inwards. Satisfied they were big enough, he cut several slits and threaded a length of stranded line through them. Then he wrapped the skins round his feet again and pulled the improvised shoe-laces tight.

He got up slowly and tried a few experimental paces. The left skin felt a bit loose. He bent and tightened the laces as far as he dared without risking a tear in the skin. The soft fur cushioned his aching feet against the rough earth. He took a few more paces and winced slightly. Still, they would have to do.

"All right, *Inkosi*?"

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"Right, Duma, I'm ready!"

"Hau! *Inkosi!* Shoes!" The big Zulu looked down ruefully at his own bare feet. Then he bent and ripped two pieces of skin for himself. He beat them together then pushed them into his pack.

"Tomorrow, *Inkosi*, I, too, will make shoes."

He passed back the pistols, strapped on his pack and led the way down the mountain.

The grass-covered plain stretched for miles over undulating country to the forest in the distance. Towards mid-afternoon the sky clouded over and rain splashed down for a short while. John covered his pistols with oiled cloth and reversed the rifle on his back so that the barrels pointed downwards. The heavy drops rolled off his water-proofed pack, but his shirt and trousers were soon soaked and stuck uncomfortably to his skin.

The rain with all its attendant discomforts proved a blessing in disguise. It softened the earth and made the going easier for his feet in their improvised protection.

He kept a watchful eye around him as he sloshed along. Herds of antelope, larger than they had seen before, wandered grazing on this plain. Once, far away in the distance, he spotted a blue-grey herd of buffalo moving morosely along. The sight of the animals cropping the grass sharpened the pangs in his stomach and, for a moment, he forgot the pain from his feet.

"We'd better get something to eat tonight, Duma," he called. "There won't be much in the forest and they'll be harder to get there, anyway."

Duma grunted as he strode along. "We shall see im-

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pala when the sun dies. They are good eating."

"Right!"

The afternoon sun burned a ragged hole in the clouds and sparkled the wide slopes into freshness. John ploughed along, the soft grass feeling much easier under his feet. The mud which he had packed round the burn on his shin had almost been washed off.

Looking down, he was gratified to see that the inflammation had nearly gone. He put down a hand. It did not feel so tender now, either.

Several trees stood away from the body of the forest, like stern sentinels in front of a leafy host. They grew tall and alone, and great white patches gleamed on their trunks where bark had been rubbed away.

John pointed. "What did that?"

"Rhino—to clean their horns," Duma rubbed a finger up and down his nose in explanation.

John followed him almost to the edge of the forest. The Zulu suddenly held up his hand. John slipped off his rifle. His befurred feet were dead silent in the long grass. He could feel the wind blowing on to him. With it, round a clump of trees, came a herd of impala. They trotted daintily down a gentle slope about two hundred yards away. He cocked his weapon. The long grass swished against his sides as he edged forward. He remembered to hold the rifle low to prevent any sunlight glinting on the barrels.

The impala were only a hundred yards off when the wind dropped. He held his breath and watched the waist-high grass. It bent again as the wind started blowing from his side. The impala leader looked up, his

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graceful head alert, long curving horns slanting down his back.

"Now, *Inkosi!* The wind changes!"

The rest of the herd jerked their heads and the leader suddenly leaped away. As his herd followed him, John picked out a small buck. He saw the brown shoulder under his sight. It looked an easy shot and he squeezed the trigger.

The antelope fled in a series of huge leaps, clearing ten-foot bushes effortlessly in their stride and hurtling over the high grass with the ease of racing greyhounds.

He waved away the gun-smoke and looked round to where Duma was standing, but the Zulu was loping towards the impala. As he reached it, he bent, then straightened and raised his arm.

John cupped his hands. "Do you want any help?"

"He is a small one. I can manage."

The forest inside looked wet from the recent rain. John decided to camp on the outskirts, under one of the sentinel trees. He had a fire going and armfuls of grass cut for sleeping places by the time Duma returned with the skinned animal. The Zulu jointed it and washed the pieces in a small stream which rippled through the trees. John set up three sets of forked stakes round the fire, then skewered the meat on long faggots and rested them in these forks.

The aroma of roasting venison set his mouth watering. He took a handful of salt and sprinkled the joints as Duma turned them against the heat. Fat sizzled and spluttered as the meat cooked. He went to each in turn with a small cup, caught the dripping as it ran down,

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and poured it over the roasting meat again and again.

His sister Janet had done it like that on the few occasions she had been able to afford beef. Her husband hadn't earned much money. They had usually eaten offal—kidneys, liver or tripe—with potatoes. John grimaced to himself. At sea it had been boiled salt pork most of the time.

The skin on the venison looked brown and inviting. This was real food. Duma cut a slice from the joint and tossed it from hand to hand until it cooled. He smacked his lips as he chewed.

"Good, *Inkosi!*" he grinned. "Very good!"

Later that night, his stomach weighted and full, John lay back on his grass bed. The fire was only a heap of glowing embers in the darkness. From far away, the hacking laugh of a hyena echoed across the plain. The stars hung brightly in the deep sky as he fell asleep.

Next morning he worked on the fire while Duma cleaned the impala skin. His leg felt better, but his feet, though partly healed, still ached from their battering on the mountain. He picked up his leopard-skin slippers. They felt wet. He reached down and pulled on the right one. As he tightened the laces, it split along the line of holes. The thing was useless. He tossed it disgustedly into the grass.

"These shoes have broken, Duma," he called. "Do you think there will be enough impala 'skin to make two pairs?"

Duma looked up from his labours. "Plenty, *Inkosi*. Cut your pieces from the back. It is thicker and harder

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than the stomach. It will not tear so easily."

John limped to the impala skin and cut a couple of pieces from it. The skin felt hard. He wrapped the first piece round his foot and frowned. It would not be easy to walk with these on.

He got up and retrieved the leopard-skin slippers. Using them as inner soles, he wrapped the hard skin tightly round his feet. He walked a few paces. They felt fine.

"Nearly finished, Duma?"

"Ready now, *Inkosi*. Look!" The Zulu proudly lifted up one foot for John's inspection. "Shoes!" He laughed happily.

John trampled some damp earth over the embers of the fire and hoisted on his pack. He held his rifle in his hand, so that it would not catch in the overhanging branches as he passed.

"You go first, Duma. Cut trail."

"Right, *Inkosi*."

"Tonight we shall sleep on the beach."

"Perhaps, *Inkosi*. We shall see."

Duma's cutlass never stopped. His muscular arm swung ceaselessly in front as he carved a way through the virgin bush. The trees were widely spaced, but their trunks were profusely interlaced with tough vines and fat-leaved foliage.

The interior was cool and moderately pleasant. John humped his pack higher. No need for a rest now. He did not feel tired although they must have been travelling for about five hours. There would be plenty of time for rest at the coast.

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"Do you think we'll get there tonight, Duma?"

"Maybe, *Inkosi*, but I cannot smell the sea yet."

Later that afternoon John frowned and wrinkled his nose. He turned his head away from the smell and pursed his lips.

"You smell that, *Inkosi*?"

"Yes. What a smell! What is it?"

"Careful, here *Inkosi*." Duma took a small step forward, his head thrust out like a hunting dog. "Python, *Inkosi*! He is near here. We must go round him." The Zulu struck left into the surrounding forest. The smell receded.

"Phew!" snorted John. "Do they always smell like that?"

"Not always. Only when they have eaten and fallen into a deep sleep. Then they smell."

John slipped his thumb from the hammers of his rifle. "Well, it's almost gone now. We should have passed it."

"I think so."

Several hours' hard marching brought darkness and a change in the air. There was brine in it. John felt sure. The coast could not be far now.

"Sea must be close, Duma!"

"Five hours. *Inkosi*."

"Five hours! As long as that?"

"I'm sure, *Inkosi*. The salt from the water travels far overland."

John pursed his lips. It was no use risking this forest at night—not with pythons around.

"Let's camp here, Duma. It's too dark to see now."

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"We'll be there in the morning, *Inkosi*. I'll make a fire." The Zulu paused for a moment. "I wish the sun was shining."

John looked up from his pack. "Why?"

"Then we could use the glass, *Inkosi*."

John started as he remembered his promise. "Sorry, Duma. I'll show you tomorrow. That's a promise!"

Duma beamed over the fire. "Thank you, *Inkosi*."

After the meal John sat back and examined his legs and feet. The burn had healed. He touched it. Duma's remedy had certainly worked. His feet did not feel so sore now, either. In a few days they would be quite healed. Satisfied, John slipped the leather soles on again and lay back.

Duma, in the fashion of his tribe, had cut a small log of wood on which to rest his neck and he murmured to himself in Zulu as he lay down. John felt the comforting bulk of the rifle at his side. The stars above were as bright as sternlamps in the sky. So different from the fog and filth of London. . . .

John rubbed a hand over his forehead. Charlie, his sister's husband, would probably still be working at his printing press. He never went to bed till late. John half-smiled to himself in the darkness. It was Charlie who had taught him how to read and write; Charlie who had shown him how to spell by putting the lead letters together to make words, then sliding them into the press and printing them.

It was really due to Charlie, he told himself, that he was Lieutenant King's apprentice. He would never have been chosen if he had not been able to read and

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write. That was what had set him apart from the other powder monkeys. Most of them had difficulty in spelling their own names. . . .

The fire crackled as the flames caught some of the damp wood, and Duma stirred in his sleep. John watched his companion for a moment, then turned on his side, his cheek feeling for a soft place on his pack and his right hand gripping the cold rifle.

It seemed he had only been asleep for minutes when he suddenly jerked into wakefulness, his nerves cold with fear! Duma's body blotted out the tree above. He felt the Zulu's hand relax on his mouth as he sat up.

"Sh-s-s-sh, *Inkosi*," Duma's fingers were on his lips.

John tensed in the dark. "What's the matter?"

"Listen! Can you hear?" Duma's voice was barely audible.

John slowly turned his head in the direction of the Zulu's pointing finger. He felt blood surge through his veins and his back grew cold.

Through the inky depths of the forest, swelling in volume with every second came groans punctuated by strident shouts and sharp cracks. The noise of breaking branches grew louder. It was eerie, weird. He started as a frightened bird flapped overhead.

"They are coming this way," hissed Duma. "We must move—quickly!"

Snapping into action, John hurriedly laced his shoes with trembling fingers, issuing rapid orders at the same time. "Heap earth on the embers, Duma! Put some branches over the top. Stow away the rest of the impala!"

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By the time the Zulu had finished, John had re-checked the priming of his rifle and pistols.

The monstrous sounds were nearer. In a matter of minutes, all traces of the camp were obliterated. Pack on his back, he crouched next to Duma in the darkness. His every sense was alert. His ears strained as the cracks and groans grew louder. That was a human cry! A cry of torment! It sounded terrible.

He put his mouth to Duma's ear. "Who are they? What's happening?"

"I don't know, *Inkosi*. It sounds like men. But what men can they be?"

John pressed back against a tree as two men suddenly appeared out of the dark. They wielded long matchets and carved a way for the gruesome procession that followed.

Long lines of slaves staggered past, men, women, even little children! They whimpered and moaned under the lash.

John strained his eyes into the night to guess the nationality of the captors, but it was too dark to see. Then, as the last slaves passed, a beam of moonlight slanted through the trees. It fell on a tall man bringing up the rear. The feeble beam picked out his features and clothing. John's heart gave a leap.

This man's skin was white and the brass buttons on his sailor's jacket gleamed in the moonlight. He had a cutlass in his hand and John could see a heavy pistol bumping on his thigh as he walked.

An Englishman, perhaps? John wrapped his fingers tightly round his rifle.

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Two slaves fell. Using his whip freely, the rear-guard spat a torrent of words at them. John stiffened. The rifle barrels felt hard under his fingers. He had heard that language before. He knew it well. It was French!

He felt his mouth grow hard as the last of the pitiful procession vanished into the forest.

"They're heading north to Delagoa Bay."

"I don't think so, *Inkosi*. They will have ship on the beach."

John put his hand on Duma's arm. "Let's follow them. They'll lead us to the coast."

Keeping within hearing distance, he set off after the caravan. By morning the forest had dwindled away. Goaded forward by their captors, the slaves marched along the burning beach. The pathetic column crawled steadily northwards.

Bright sunlight picked out the full horror of their agony. Keeping to the outskirts of the forest, John eyed the miserable trail of human wreckage on the beach. He felt his stomach heave and anger burn within him as he watched. Women, children and men were all manacled. They marched in twos, each pair separated by a double forked stick lashed round their necks. If a man fell, he dragged his partner down with him. Then both were lashed unmercifully until they staggered to their feet and ploughed through the sand to rejoin that black caterpillar of misery.

The firmer ground near the forest was easier going than the sand. John found himself not only able to remain unseen, but also to keep an easy pace with that terrible march on the beach. Biting back his anger, he

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forced himself to think what he and Duma could do.

First he counted the slavers carefully. Two walked in front, three on either side and two brought up the rear. That made ten. They all carried muskets on their shoulders and pistols in their belts. The tall rearguard was a particular brute. His whip-arm never seemed to tire.

The slaves dragged slowly north and the sun was low before the beach turned in to form a small bay. There, riding at anchor in the sheltered water, lay a small brig, the slaver. Her sides were painted as black as her nefarious trade.

John made out six piercings on her starboard side. That meant at least twelve cannon, either four pounder or six-pounder. She was cut low at the waist and looked as if she could move fast through the water.

As the sun slid behind the forest, the slaves tottered to a halt. The smoke from cooking fires burning on the beach wafted to the forest. Huge pots containing food for the slaves, were set on these.

Five men appeared on the brig's deck and three of them pulled a long boat shorewards. John munched cold slices of venison in silence as he watched. On the beach, the slavers kept an alert guard, muskets on their shoulders.

After the meal, the slaves were herded in batches into the longboat. It crawled over the calm water to the ship. The slavers repeated this operation until all were aboard. The longboat was sculled back to the beach by a single man. He dragged it up the sand and lit a pipe, then he made himself comfortable on a dune.

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Across the water, the cries of the slaves mingled with the sharp clang of metal on metal. All the anger John had bottled up, suddenly burst.

"They're chaining them below, the swines! Do you hear, Duma? By Heavens, I'll not stand by and do nothing."

Duma looked up quickly. "What can we do, *Inkosi*? The slavers are too many for us!"

"We may be able to do something," gritted John.

"Oh, ho, why bother with these people, *Inkosi*? Hau! They are slaves now. If they had fought like men they would not be here. They chose slavery. Let them be slaves!"

"But, Duma, protested John, 'you saw what happened on the beach. You saw how they were treated! Like beasts!'

"When you are a slave you are a beast, *Inkosi*. Leave them. We must get the medicines for the Settlement."

John slumped an open hand on his thigh. "We would not have marched tonight, anyway," he rapped decisively. "I'll free them tonight."

The Zulu only glowered at the beach. He opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. "As you say, *Inkosi*," he growled.

There was a moment's silence. John put his hand on the Zulu's shoulder. "Come on, Duma," he said.

The Zulu suddenly grinned, his old self again. "Hau! A white man makes them slaves—another sets them free! *Inkosi*, your ways are strange."

John, feeling relieved, bent forward. "Listen carefully. This is what we will do."

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An hour later the coast was wrapped in the darkness that comes between sunset and moonrise. From the ship came the drunken shouts of the carousing sailors. The sentry at the boat looked wistfully seawards.

A low call drifted through the darkness and a huge black man seemed to materialize from the night. The sentry whirled and stiffened. His mouth gaped. John saw the back of the sentry's head not three feet away. Holding his pistol by the barrel, he leaped forward.





CHAPTER TEN

* * *

On Board the Slaver

THE pistol butt struck like a mamba. The sentry jerked up, his arms flapped, then he groaned and slumped into the soft sand. Kneeling down, John thrust a hand into his shirt.

"He's alive, Duma," he whispered. "Bind his hands and feet. Use the line in my pack. Hurry!"

While Duma was busy with the line, John stripped off the man's shirt and improvised a gag. The hapless sentry never moved.

"Finished, *Inkosi*," Duma crouched back in the darkness and brushed his hands.

John tested the Zulu's knots. They felt strong enough.

"All right! Drag him past that dune. The moon will be

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up any minute now and they might see him lying here."

He snatched a quick glance at the boat. It was a small craft which could be handled by one man if necessary. The sentry's musket was still where he had left it, propped carelessly against the gunwale.

John grabbed it, shook out the priming and pushed the weapon into the sand. He then cocked his pistols and both the barrels of his rifle as Duma appeared silently out of the night.

"All right, Duma?"

"He still sleeps, *Inkoss*."

"Good. Let's get this boat out."

John put a shoulder to the stem of the boat and stifled an exclamation as his foot slipped. He tried again and this time the little craft ground over the sand into the water.

He pulled himself quietly aboard. Lying at full length alongside the gunwale, he put a hand over the side and began to paddle cautiously. With his left hand he motioned Duma to do the same.

The boat nosed silently towards the black brig

The slaves had quietened down, but a lot of noise still came from the scamen. Duma hissed and pointed to gyrating shadows on the lamplit windows in the stern. John nodded, but kept his eyes glued to the waist of the ship.

Surely, even with their apparent lack of discipline, the slavers would have a watchkeeper posted?

His eyes strained into the dark. Not a soul moved on deck. He dipped a cupped hand into the water. If that brig had been British-manned, the alarm would have

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sounded by now and all would have been lost

A door suddenly thudded and John jerked his hand back, gesturing to Duma to be still. The boat drifted easily, within a stone's throw of the slaver. The hunched shape of a seaman appeared behind the bulwarks. He put a hand against the mainmast and swayed there a moment. Then he rolled to the side and looked out over the water.

John felt a shiver of fear trickle down his spine — the man was looking straight at them!

He lay motionless, hardly daring to breathe, expecting to hear a hail at any moment. His fingers tightened on the gunwale as the man's arm went up. He had seen them!

His breath sighed between his teeth when he saw the bottle. It tipped into the seaman's mouth and stayed there. Then, emptied, it plopped into the water. The slaver stared drunkenly down at it for a moment, then swayed upright and rolled forward, his boots clumping on the deck.

John started to ease out his hand when the door thudded again. Several men appeared this time and walked unsteadily forward. He narrowed his eyes and counted them. There were ten.

The sentry made eleven. That would leave four of the fifteen men he had counted that afternoon still in the after-cabin. More shouts came from forward before the ship grew silent.

The boat nosed forward again. The bulk of the slaver loomed nearer. Barefooted, John crept over the thwarts and put out a hand as they came alongside. Reaching

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up, he made the painter fast to a gun-port lanyard and took a careful look over the bulwarks. The deck seemed deserted. He bent and jerked his head to Duma.

John flung a leg over the side. A moment later he was squatting in the shadow of the mainmast, his heart thumping uncomfortably in his chest. His companion panted beside him. John glanced quickly round, then pointed to the foreward hatch. They walked on tip toe, their bare feet noiseless on the wooden deck.

The hatch cover had been thrown back, showing the first few steps of a ladder that dropped into the blackness below. Sounds of heavy breathing, then a grunt, came up the hatchway.

Holding his breath, John slid the cover silently over the open hatch. He reached up for the capstanbar which Duma held out and pushed this through the hatch slots. They waited, tensed, for a shout.

But no alarm came from below.

That took care of ten of them. The hatch-cover looked strong enough to hold an enraged lion. So far, so good.

He nodded his head at the stern and slid both pistols from his belt. The rifle felt comfortably heavy against his back.

The double doors leading down to the after-cabin were ajar. A tinkle of glass, followed by a curse, sounded below. Putting out a tentative hand, he pushed the doors a crack wider. A rumble of French, interrupted by shouts and laughter, floated up the stairs.

He set his teeth, pushed the doors open and slipped

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down the stairs. Standing spread-eagled against the bulkhead, he strained his eyes towards the cabin.

Two men were seated at a table, their reddened faces lit by the light from two oil-lamps which hung from the deck-head. A ginger-bearded ruffian banged his fist on the table and ripped out a stream of French.

His companion, his red shirt stained and dirty, leaned back, an sulky expression round his mouth. A third man, dark and bare-chested, lay snoring on a bunk that ran under the stern windows. The deck was littered with empty bottles. A smashed glass lay splintered in a corner.

John's heart pounded. He leaned back and whispered something to Duma. "Go!" The Zulu vanished into the darkness. Gripping his pistols tightly, John stepped into the cabin.

The first to see him was 'Red shirt.' He stared up uncomprehendingly for a moment, his gaze growing sharper with the dawn of anger. He staggered to his feet, sending his chair back with a crash.

His actions startled the man with the ginger beard. He swung round and opened his mouth to shout.

"Silence!" hissed John, pushing his pistols forward. The mouth shut quickly at this uncompromising threat. The bare-chested man on the bunk snored. Red shirt spat out a mouthful of French. He and his companion stared, waiting.

"*Je ne comprends pas,*" answered John. "Speak English."

They shook their heads. He was ready to take a step forward when their heads suddenly stopped.

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Red shirt's eyes glittered. John felt his breath tangle in his throat as he whirled, and found himself looking down the muzzle of a pistol.

The man holding it was tall and swarthy. A ragged scar ran the length of his face to where his teeth grinned suceringly in his beard. The pistol-barrel resting on his fore-arm never wavered.

His voice was harsh, his English hesitant and nasal.

"Put you gun down," he snarled. "What you do 'ere, eh?"

His blood icy, head swimming, John let his arms fall slowly to his sides. This must be the end, now! The whole scheme had been madness. Two men against fifteen! How could he have hoped to . . .

"Well?"

He saw the finger tighten on the trigger.

"Speak!"

John opened his mouth, but no words would come. The scar-faced man nodded his head and Red shirt slid round the table, cat-footed. John could smell his wine-sodden breath and saw lamplight winking on the blade of the knife.

Then everything happened simultaneously. A slim black shape hurtled through the air, smashed into Red shirt's jaw and knocked him to the deck. John ducked as the man screamed. The cabin burst into noise and he felt the hot blast of a pistol sear his cheek. Then his own gun exploded. He saw Scar-face clutch his shoulder and stagger back against the bulkhead.

The sleeping slaver jerked up and dived for the end of the bunk. John's second shot was wide. But the

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sound of it sent the man cowering back in terror.

Duma's voice sounded close behind him. "Sorry, *Inkou*," he began. "I was just——"

"Doesn't matter now, Duma," rapped John. "No time for talk." He pushed the empty pistols into his belt and unslung his rifle. "You saw where the slaves are?"

"Yes, *Inkou*. In the middle of a great hole."

"Right! Get down there and loose them. Quickly! Call me as soon as you are ready!"

Duma vanished up the companion-way.

John looked down at Scar-face and pointed to the cabin windows.

"Get over there!"

Still clutching his shoulder, Scar face got up and crossed to where his two fellows stood against the cabin windows. The man on the deck never moved.

Scar-face spat. "'Oo are you? Englishmen?"

John nodded

"What you think you do 'ere? What you want? Eh?"

John jerked his head towards the deck "You hear that?"

The big man looked incredulous. His eyebrows closed together and blood poured into his face. He started up. "You leave zem! You 'ear!"

"Silence!" snapped John. "They are going free."

The wounded man's hands clenched and unclenched. The blood drained from his face leaving it white and ugly.

"If I see you once more I keel you, English swine!"

From the deck came shouts and the rumbling of

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chains. The three men muttered together. The ginger-bearded fellow nodded and Scar-face got up. His shoulder must still have hurt him, for he winced as he rose.

Head racing, John swung his rifle.

"Sit down!" he snapped. "Down! I'll shoot the first man to move!"

The wounded Frenchman mouthed at John in helpless anger. But he sat down.

It all depended on that fore-hatch, thought John. If the mob below broke it open he would have no chance. And where was Duma? He should have finished by now. He felt anxiety grip him, and the men in front started talking again.

"All on deck now, *Inkosi!*" Duma's eyes gleamed with excitement as he shoved his head round the door.

Thank God for that! Now they could get away.

"Right, Duma! Let's make——"

"Some are still chained, *Inkosi*. I can't free them!"

More delay! He felt the deck reverberate under his feet. The men for'ard were pounding on the fore-hatch. He bit his lip in frustration. Still, he could not leave the chained slaves now.

He addressed Scar-face and pointed to Ginger beard. "Tell that man to strike the chains off. Now!"

Ginger beard shrank back as Scar-face translated.

"Well, what's the matter? Hurry!"

"'E won't go. The slaves with chains are truculent. 'E ees frightened."

"My man will see he comes to no harm!" grated John. "Move!" He levelled his rifle at Ginger beard.

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The slaver followed Duma reluctantly. Minutes later, hate leaped from the captain's eyes as the clink of steel on steel rang from the deck.

"Be certain I will keel you," he snarled. "I, Capitane Dorval, Master of the *Isle de Bourbon*, will keel you for this night's work. You peeg!"

John opened his mouth to reply when Duma's voice bellowed down the companion-way: "Ready now, *Inkosi!*"

John shouted back; "Can they swim?"

He heard Duma yelling at the slaves. Then: "They say so, *Inkosi.*"

"Then get them overboard, quickly!" Duma shouted again and John heard several splashes. There was a pause—then more splashes and shouts. It sounded as if they were all away.

The thumping on the fore-hatch increased. He gripped his rifle. The hatch would not last much longer.

He howled up the companion-way. They had to hurry! Footsteps sounded outside, Duma padded into the cabin with Ginger beard. "All swimming now, *Inkosi,*" he panted.

John held out a length of line and pointed to the slavers.

A short while later, John leaped down into the boat. He bent his back at the oars. Duma had done a good job on those officers' hands, but the beating on the fore-hatch sounded different now. It must be splintering.

The boat passed several bobbing heads in the dark water

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They all appeared to be swimming strongly. John heaved on the oars. With one last pull, the keel grated on the sand. The moon was up, and he saw himself surrounded by gesticulating figures on the beach. They were all talking excitedly.

"You understand them, Duma?"

"A little, *Inkosi*. They give great praise to you. They say——"

A shout echoed from the slaver.

"Tell them to get away from this place as quickly as they can. They can travel faster through the bush than the white men. Tell them to hurry!"

The slaves stood perplexed for a moment as Duma urged them to go. Then, in little groups of twos and threes, they made their way, chattering, across the moonlit sands—dark shapes that were soon swallowed up by the darkness of the forest.

Duma's voice sounded close. "What about the sentry, *Inkosi*?"

John started. The sentry? He had forgotten him! "Cut him loose, Duma. Then let us make a move. We'd better be quick!"

"Right, *Inkosi*."

John ploughed across the sand to the forest and the camp. He bent, dusted off his feet and slipped on his home-made shoes. He felt in his pack for food when he remembered that Duma carried the venison. He swallowed, and reloaded his pistols.

As he stuck them in his belt, Duma appeared. "The man still slept, *Inkosi*. I cut his bonds and put him in the boat."

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"Well done, Duma. Hear that shouting on the ship? Let's move. They'll never catch us in this bush. The slaves should be well away, too. Come on." He led a cracking pace through the forest. "Did you do all I said, on the ship?"

"Yes, *Inkosi*," panted Duma. "All the chains I threw in the sea. And the fire sticks, too. There were many placed along the wall by the stairs."

"Good," grunted John. "I had should draw Dorval's teeth." He bit into a piece of venison as he led the way north to Delagoa Bay.

Tripping over exposed roots and stumbling through thick undergrowth, he tried to see in his mind's eye the rough chart scratched in the sand by Duma. The Maputo River ran into Delagoa Bay. But he knew it would be wide at the mouth and probably impassable. The best thing to do would be to keep to the forest, to cross the river higher up where it would be narrower, then make the march into the Bay.

By morning he felt waves of tiredness creeping over him, slowing his pace and bowing his shoulders under the heavy pack. As they reached the edge of the forest he tripped and nearly fell.

"Are you all right, *Inkosi*?"

"I think so, Duma. But maybe we should rest for a while. Phew! It's no use going on like this. My feet are hurting again, too. We'll make a fire later, and eat."

He threw off his pack and, lying in the shade of a tree, fell asleep.

The sun rode high in the sky when he woke. The shade had melted with the heat, and he shielded his

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eyes against the blazing light with his hands. He lay for a moment trying to collect his wandering thoughts.

Bushes crackled behind. He jerked round and then relaxed. It was only Duma. He had a pair of partridges in his left hand, a hunting knob-kerric in his right.

The Zulu grinned. "Two fat birds, *Inkosi*. I got them close to a small river nearby. I think it runs into the Maputo. The land is flat, and the march should be easy."

John rubbed a hand over his face. "Fine, Duma. We'll make a fire."

Duma stood there, uncertain. He had taken off his hide shoes and his toes wiggled in the dust.

John glanced up. "What's the matter?"

The Zulu's brown arm pointed upwards. "The sun is high, *Inkosi*, for the fire."

John grinned to himself as he remembered his promise. His hand went to the tattered pocket of his shirt and took out the burning-glass.

"Right, Duma. Watch!"

He made a little pile of dry twigs and focused the glass.

"See that small yellow light on the grass?"

"Yes, *Inkosi*, I see it."

"When I move my hand back it grows smaller—you see?"

The Zulu was breathing hard. "Hau! What magic is this?"

"Now, look. The smaller the patch gets, the hotter it is. Look, the grass smokes now! I blow . . . gently . . . There you are! A fire!"

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Duma leaped back. "*Inkosi!* Fire from the heavens! Hau!"

John stamped on the grass, and put out the little blaze. He handed the glass to Duma. "Here," he grinned. "You try."

"I?"

"Yes. Come on. Let's see you do it!"

Duma took the glass gingerly. Tongue between his teeth he focused it, making the patch of sunlight smaller—smaller—till a brown hole appeared and a wisp of smoke curled up.

He blew, and a little tongue of flame licked the grass.

"Fire from the heavens! I have made it! I have made it!"

John chuckled. "When we get back to the settlement, I will see you get such a glass as this—better than this!"

Duma beamed as he plucked the birds. "Oh, ho!" he sang to himself in Zulu. "Now has the white man made me a wizard. Now I am a wizard! Now will I be great. I will be as thunder in the land!"

After the meal, John stretched. He rose and strapped on his pack. "Ready, Duma?"

"Almost, *Inkosi*. But first——"

"Yes?"

"I found these on the ship—two for you and two for me. Here, *Inkosi*."

He held out two pairs of sea-boots constructed of black leather, thick-soled and rugged. John stared at them.

"They were in a box near the fire-sticks. Shoes, *In-*

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kosi, shoes!" He gave one pair to John.

This was a gift from the gods. Boots! Just what he needed. Now they would make short work of the march to the Bay. John excitedly pulled them on.

They felt a little tight. But that was better than having them too loose! Besides, they would stretch into a decent fit during a day's march. He strode a few paces. The boots clumped comfortably on the ground.

Duma was a good chap. "Thank you!" cried John "Thank you!"

The Zulu grinned self-consciously, and bent for his pack.

The country ahead was hard, flat and wide. But John's spirits lifted in him as he strode along. The little river was soon crossed. Soon they would come to the great Maputo. Only one more night under the stars.

Duma sang happily at his side. John could make out a few words here and there. Zulu pronunciation sounded so different when it was sung. His companion was chanting to himself about elephants, white oxen and thunder. John smiled as he strode along, the long miles reeling off under his newly-shod feet.

At ten the next morning they watched the brown, sluggish Maputo winding slowly along between its muddy banks. It looked greasy and warm. In the distance, towards the sea, smoke lifted lazily into the hot blue sky. Only a faint haze of smoke. But that meant the settlement at last!

"Come on, Duma, let's cross. We'll be there by nightfall!"

"Wait, *Inkosi*," growled the Zulu "There is some-

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thing here I do not like." He scanned the far bank and snapped his fingers.

"As I thought!"

He picked up a stone and flung it into the river. The bank suddenly crawled into life. Crocodiles scuttled down the bank and slithered into the water, like water rats!

John felt his heart drop with frustration and loathing.

"Look, Duma," he said, biting hard on his lip. "The water is shallow here. It's hardly deep enough to flow. We'll shoot our way through!"

Duma shook his head. "No, *Inkosi*. There are too many of them. Just look now——"

He motioned to where the crocodiles floated in the torpid stream.

John felt tempted to chance it, in spite of Duma's warning, when he heard a bellow downstream. He looked round and spotted a swirl in the water.

"You see that, Duma?"

"Hippo!" Duma sounded excited.

"Bait! Bait for the crocodile. Come, it's the only way!"

He floundered along the bank, past the crocodiles to where a herd of hippopotami wallowed and played in the water. They were quite close to the bank. He hated himself for what he was about to do, but on the face of it there seemed to be no other way.

He levelled his rifle on a big bull. The sight steadied, then covered the great head. He closed his mouth, shut his teeth, and the gun exploded twice.

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The hippo screamed. Its mouth opened, red tongue gaping, blood pouring from the tremendous hole in its head. The rest of the herd floundered bellowing from their stricken comrade. John panted back down the bank after Duma.

As he ran, he glimpsed the crocodiles converging on the dead beast. He saw the red-tinged flurry of water as they tore at the flesh; then he was up to his knees in slimy water, ploughing after Duma. He loaded the rifle as he splashed along.

The drill came mechanically now—powder, wad, ball, wad, ramrod, home, priming, cocked and ready. The bank was only yards away. He pushed the powder-horn to stop it banging against his side. Duma's shout sounded thin, but urgent, against the noise upstream.

The bank was only yards away, and Duma was gesticulating wildly.

John stopped and nearly over-balanced in the water.

All he saw were two gaping jaws, serrated teeth, merciless eyes sunk back in a grey armour-plated head. His breath caught in his throat as he gulped down a lungful of air. There was no time to aim.

He pushed the barrels forward and the double crash echoed down the river, slamming like thunder against the bank and rolling downstream. The crocodile, top jaw shot away, writhed in agony, its stubby feet lashing frantically at the mud on the shallow water.

"Quickly, *Inkosi*," growled the Zulu. "This is an evil place. Quickly!"

John panted for breath as they ran to the settlement.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

* * *

Samuel Bolton

THE afternoon sun flung patches of light, blistering the mud huts that marked the entrance to the settlement. Some pot bellied native children stared up with frightened eyes, then scampered inside their dwellings.

At the end of the dirt track leading between the huts stood a white washed building, a single storey affair with a dirty window set deep into the wall like one blind eye in a white face.

The soldier lounging against the building uncrossed his legs and reached for the musket propped beside him. He straightened his shako and tried to do something about the green jacket which had rumpled above his black leather belt. His cotton trousers had been white once. Now they looked as dirty as the broad green

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stripe running down the side of each leg.

The drag of his scabbard clinked as he sauntered forward. He stopped about three yards away and took a long look as his tongue rammed a wad of tobacco into his cheek. He said something in Portuguese. There were streaks of rust on his bayonet and the lock of his musket looked dull.

"What does he say, *Inkosi*?"

John shook his head. "I don't know, Duma. I can't understand Portuguese."

The soldier crossed his arms over his musket and spoke again. John held up his hand. "Do you speak English?" he asked.

The soldier spat and shrugged his shoulders.

"El Capitano. El Capitano," said John. Surely the fellow would understand he wanted to see the Commander of the settlement! But the soldier only looked puzzled.

"El Capitano," repeated John. He pointed to his eyes and said again: "El Capitano." With his left hand he gestured towards the settlement.

The soldier's eyelids flickered and he showed his teeth. "Engleesi? El Capitano?"

John nodded his head and said: "Yes, please!"

The soldier grunted, picked up his musket and beckoned. His green jacket was smudged with white where he had leaned against the wall. Scabbard clinking, he led the way down the track into a wider track—it could hardly be called a street.

A sheen of water gleamed at the end of it where a cluster of white buildings sprawled, shimmering in the

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heat. The soldier turned sharp left at the end of this track and walked up a shallow flight of stone steps into the largest building. He held up his hand as a signal to stop, then shoved his way past several soldiers lounging on the verandah. They wore the same uniforms and looked just as dirty. A few glanced up curiously then turned their heads and went on muttering to each other. Their faces glistened with perspiration. Even in this shade the heat was inescapable.

John shot a look at Duma. The Zulu was staring wide-eyed about him—at the soldiers, the buildings, the blue bay and the ships. John nudged him. The soldier was beckoning from the door.

Through the door was a dark passage with another door at the end. John went through this and found himself in a large room. The floors were wooden, the walls bare. In front of a large fly-spotted window was a table covered with books, papers and an inkwell, and a few bedraggled quills. He sniffed. The place reeked of stale wine.

The sentry nodded at the table. "El Capitano," he grunted. Then he spat on the floor and rubbed the patch ruminatingly with the toe of his boot.

John opened his mouth to speak, but by now his eyes had become accustomed to the dim light in the room. He really saw El Capitano!

The man was huge, even fatter than Shackford! His heavy black eyes glistened between pouched eyelids. A stubble-dotted double chin rolled over the collar of his white tunic which was drawn taut across his stomach. His legs stuck out under the table and from the cuffs of

Samuel Bolton

his green uniform trousers poked two hairy feet.

"Engleesi?"

John looked up as the question rumbled round the room. He cleared his throat.

"Yes, Captain. I have—"

"Where you from?" The Captain's English was slow, accented, but understandable.

"Port Natal."

The Captain pursed his thick lips and grunted. Behind the sloe-black of his eyes came a flicker. "This time tell me truth. Where you from?"

John looked steadily back, a puzzled frown across his face. "But I told you the truth, Captain. I've come from Port Natal. With the help of my companion here." He gestured to Duma. "It's taken us twenty-eight days."

The Captain's eyes were almost closed. Suddenly they snapped open and he slammed a hand on the table. The room rocked.

"Don't lie to me, Engleesi! No man can walk from Port Natal, let alone a boy like you. *Sapristi!* No man can pass the land of Chaka! Leave alone the animals, the country, the lack of water. It is impossible! You lie! Now tell me truth. Where you from?" His voice ended in a scream.

John bristled. The fat oaf, he thought. Who does he think—— He took a step forward.

"Listen, Captain," he snapped, "I *have* come from Port Natal and I've walked all the way—all six hundred and fifty miles. The men at the settlement there are ill with fever. They gave me money to buy medicines from you." He dug a hand into the money belt next his skin.

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and lugged out the five gold pieces. He slammed them, on the table. "Here's your money, El Capitano. Five gold pieces. If you'll kindly let me have medicines I'll be gone." He flashed an angry glare as he finished.

Blood poured into the El Capitano's face, mottling it. He ripped open his collar and flung to his feet, sending his chair back with a crash.

"You watch your tongue! You t'ink I'm fool, eh? Why would men send a boy like you all dis way? You t'ink I'm mad? You are landed from ship. You come to spy! You t'ink I don't know you an' your Englees ways? You see! I show you!"

He bellowed an order. Boots echoed in the passage outside and several soldiers burst into the room. The Captain pointed and spat out a mouthful of Portuguese.

One man, musket ready, came forward. Duma swung his assegai back.

"You touch, you die!" he growled in Zulu. He turned his head. "What is the matter, *Inkosi*? Where are the medicines? Let us go from here!"

"Wait, wait!" cried John. "Put down your spear."

He had to do something. Perhaps he should not have spoken so sharply. He turned desperately to the fat Portuguese.

"What is the meaning of this, Captain! I'm telling the truth! In God's name, man, all I want are the medicines! I'm not a spy! Would I come here openly like this if I were? Ask yourself!"

"Don't you bandy words with me, you spy!" shouted the Captain. "I know your insolent Englees ways!"

John bit back an angry retort. How could you talk

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to a man like that? he asked himself hopelessly.

He held out his hands in despair and opened his mouth to speak.

"Silence!" screamed the Captain. He yelled orders at the soldiers. John felt himself grabbed and propelled along. The rifle and pack were ripped from his back, the pistols from his belt. A door opened. He stumbled through and fell headlong. Looking up, he saw Duma stagger after him. The door clanged to, and bolts grated as they were shot home.

A moment later, the Captain's face appeared at a barred grille high in the door.

"The Supremo will see you when he gets back."

"Why can't I see him now?" shouted John, crouching in the dark.

"'E is in Portugal. But 'e will be back---in four months!" The bloated face vanished.

Four months! That was too late! John sunk his head in his hands. Everything was finished now!

The walking, the swimming, the dead men lying on the burning plain behind . . . All for nothing! His body shook.

He tried to focus his mind on something, some mental prop to cling to. But his thoughts were angry, wild and despairing. They swept about his head like grey, sightless bats in a deserted house. His chest heaved. They had got to Delagoa Bay. They had crossed the plains, the mountains and the rivers. They had killed, gone hungry and nearly died of thirst—all for a handful of medicine that would save the lives of maybe twenty men. And here he was, sprawled in a putrid Portuguese

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cell like some murderer or thief. All because some popinjay in a dirty uniform was suspicious.

He felt his eyes swell and a hot tear roll down his sunburned cheek. The voice from the corner of the cell spoke twice before he heard it properly.

He lifted his head and shook it. Somebody was talking. It was an English voice! An Englishman—here?

He whirled and looked in the direction of the sound. The voice chuckled.

“So they got you, too, matey ”

“Who—who are you? English?”

“Samuel Bolton,” came the reply “English Master gunner of the brigantine *Catalpa*. Guest of the Portuguese Government for the past seven weeks—as near as I can make it. Who are you?”

Words tumbled from John’s lips as he blurted out who he was, where he was from and why he had come. “And now,” he said, his voice choked, “now they say I’ve got to wait four months. Four months! It’ll be too late, then!”

“Aye, I heard the fat Capitano tell you lad. Half an hour alone with him and I guarantee he’d sing a different tune.” Sam Bolton shifted into the gleam of light from the cell’s only window.

He was naked but for a pair of cotton trousers. His head was massive, supported by a thick neck. His broad chest was covered with a mat of hair and the arms resting on his knees were brown and muscular. His voice was deep; it sounded as if he was a Devon^hman.

The brigantine *Catalpa* had run into a storm fifty miles north of Delagoa Bay. Three of her crew of seven

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had been swept overboard. The four survivors had brought her back to port. Three had died of fever soon after arriving and the Portuguese authorities had impounded the ship. Bolton had been flung into prison. He had been unable to pay the levy required of all ships that anchored at the Bay.

"But wasn't there anything you could do?" asked John. "Isn't there a British representative of some sort here?"

"No, lad," grunted Bolton. "Far as I know we're the only two Englishmen here, and it looks like here we stay until the Supremo gets back—whoever he may be."

"But haven't you thought of escape?"

Bolton chuckled. "One man! There are two hundred soldiers outside! And the bush beyond them. I wouldn't stand a chance."

"Well, we are three now," said John.

"Aye, I saw the black fellow. He's a big 'un."

There was a pause while Bolton thought "My ship's still in the Bay, too! The warden told me they've put two guards on her."

"Well?"

The old seaman looked steadily at John. He shifted closer and chuckled. Then his voice dropped.

"Night-time is our best chance. Everyone around here gets drunk when it gets dark. It's the only way they can sleep in this heat—so they say. I've learned some of the lingo while I've been here."

"Tonight, then!" John was excited. "We'll do it tonight!"

Bolton's eyebrows wrinkled questioningly. "Steady

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young feller. We'll have to make some sort of plan first. We're unarmed and there are at least four guards on duty at night."

"What does the *umlungu* say, *Inkosi*?"

"We are going to leave here tonight, Duma," whispered John.

"Is it is good, *Inkosi*," grunted Duma. "I do not like this place and I fear that fat one!"

John leaned forward till his face was near Bolton. "Now," he whispered, "what time do they bring the food?"

* * *

Hours later the cell was dark—so dark that it could almost be felt. Footsteps clattered along the passage and stopped outside. Dishes clinked. A key poked into the lock and turned. The arc of light from the dimly lit passage grew wider as the door swung open.

A soldier, tray in hand, stood blocking the doorway. He came into the cell and put the tray down on the filthy floor. From the guardroom at the end of the passage came shouts and the tinkle of a tin mug falling on the floor. The soldier, hands on hips, stood in the middle of the cell, muttering. John grunted as if asleep.

Bolton suddenly rapped out a few words in Portuguese. The sentry's hand flew to his belt as he whirled towards the open door. The next second Bolton's arm was round his neck, crushing the consciousness out of him. The sentry's mouth opened, and John hastily stuffed his hand into it. He felt the teeth bite, then relax. The sentry was "out." Some breathless seconds

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later he was on the floor, hands tied with his belt and trousers bound round his ankles. John weighted the pistol in his hand. It was Portuguese and did not have the familiar feel of his own, but it would serve.

Barefooted, he crept to the door. A light glimmered at the end of the passage. Bolton was close behind him.

"The thought of a snake don't half make them jump," he whispered. John grinned to himself through taut lips. Now for the guardroom. He prayed fervently they had been drinking heavily in there. He jerked his head and crept forward, close to the wall.

Two soldiers were sleeping, their backs propped against the wall. The *El Capitano* was gone. Seated at his table were three men. They were busy studying cards held fanwise in their hands. An open bottle stood near the ink-well.

It would have been easy enough if it had not been for the single soldier sitting away from his fellows. His musket lay across his knees and he looked wide awake.

John pulled his head back into the passage. In signs and whispers he told Duma and Bolton what was going on. The single soldier was the stumbling-block. He would be able to cock and fire his musket before they could get half-way across the room.

"*Inkosi.*"

John put his ear to Duma's mouth. "Look, *Inkosi*. My stick—there on the floor!"

John swung his eyes round. Duma's knob-kernie was lying against the wall just inside the guardroom. His heart pounded. That thing was as accurate as a pistol in Duma's hands, and just as deadly. He bent down. His

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arm was in full view of the whole guardroom for three heart-thumping seconds. Then, lifting the knob-kerrie clear of the floor, he jerked back. Duma gripped it in his big hands. John cocked his pistol and watched the Zulu slide in front of him. The brown arm went back, hovered like a hawk, then struck. John leaped after it and dived for the table. The card players, dumfounded, dropped their hands and cards fluttered to the floor. The soldier, struck by the knob-kerrie, was bleeding and unconscious against the wall.

A musket clicked and John sensed Bolton beside him. The sailor snapped out some Portuguese. The card players stood up. They glanced to where Duma was losing no time in binding and gagging the unconscious man. Lamplight glowed on their frightened faces as Bolton shepherded them towards the wall. His hand flicked round their belts and threw their weapons in a corner.

"Ask them where our equipment is, Sam."

Bolton repeated the question. One of the soldiers flapped a hand. John nodded to Duma and the Zulu padded behind the Captain's table.

"It's all here, *Inkosi*."

"Bring it over, Duma." John held out his hand and strapped on his pack while Bolton covered the soldiers. "Now, Sam, where are the medicines?"

The card players looked blank. Bolton put his hand to his mouth, made signs of illness and asked them again. John watched closely, but all three men wore puzzled expressions and did not seem to know what he was at. They shook their heads when Bolton put the

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question to the bewildered soldiers yet again.

John stiffened. The man on the left was shaking his head a bit too hard. Behind his blank stare lay something else. Only a flicker, maybe, but something. John slipped over and rammed his pistol into the man's stomach.

"Talk," he snapped. "Where is it?"

The soldier trembled. John felt hard bone under the muzzle. Then the soldier's mouth opened and he began to babble.

"Says it's in the next room," hissed Bolton. "On a shelf—glass jars of it."

"Can you read Portuguese as well?"

"Aye. Learned a bit up and down this coast."

"Then have a look, Sam. But hurry, we've plenty to do yet."

Bolton snatched up a lamp from the table and was gone.

"Ready now, *Inkosi*?"

"Nearly, Duma. The *umlungu* is getting the medicines. Then we can go. You bind these soldiers with their belts."

John stamped down fear and impatience as Duma bound the men in front. A lamp glowed at the door.

"All right! I've got it. Three jars. Time for a move."

The lamp was back on the table. John snatched a quick look round. Those soldiers would be quiet for some time yet. He carried his rifle at the trail and led the way on tip-toe out of the building.

The moon was up, turning the Bay into a pool of mercury. A rough jetty flanked by silent, white houses,

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cut across the end of the street. John was about to leap down the steps when he stopped in mid-stride. There was a recumbent figure at his feet, and another! Five soldiers were sleeping on the verandah!

Putting a hand to his mouth he looked anxiously down as he tip-toed across the verandah into the street. After thirty silent yards he turned to Bolton:

"Where's the *Catalpa*?"

"Can't see 'er yet. We'll have to get right to the jetty first."

"All right. Come on."

From the forest at the back of the settlement came the cough of a lion, followed by a scream of pain; but the dwellings remained silent. Delagoa Bay was wrapped in sleep.

The wooden planks of the jetty were wet and he tied his boots together, then slung them round his neck. Duma did the same.

"And now, *Inkosi*?"

"We must find the ship, Duma." Then to Bolton: "Can you make her out, Sam?"

The sailor looked over the Bay in silence. His head swayed then stopped. "Think that's her. Do you see? Past that schooner. I'd know her rig anywhere." His head bent. "I don't see any boat alongside her, though. Reckon we'll have to swim."

John bit his lip. That meant firearms would be useless. Still, there was nothing else for it.

"Swim, Duma," he whispered, "to that ship there. Can you see her?" He pointed to where the brigantine was lying about two hundred yards out.

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"Right, *Inkosi!*" Duma answered cheerfully

John pulled the straps of his pack and rifle tighter
He lowered himself down the rough wooden piles and
felt the warm waters of the bay lapping at his bare feet
He let go and sank without a sound

The swim would have to be slow and quiet To anyone watching they would be as conspicuous as ants in a sugar pot in this light

Duma and Bolton spouted beside him Using his hands and legs, John pulled steadily for the ship He felt ripples run in front of his face as he struck forward The pack on his back grew heavier Puffing, he trod water and looked up through dripping eyes

Only a hundred yards to go now

Suddenly a loud scream hurtled across the bay sending brittle echoes rippling into the forest It sounded loud enough to wake the dead John filtered in his stroke, his stomach knotting Then Duma spat at his side and grunted a few words of Zulu

A screech-owl of some sort!

Seconds later a swift shadow swept across the water John looked up and saw something small and furry dangling from the owl's talons He heard it whisper as the great bird glided overhead

Minutes later he felt a tap on his shoulder It was Sam Bolton

"There's a Jacob's ladder midships Make for that Get your knife ready— may have to use it"

"Right, Sam"

He jerked his body straight and glided to the side His hand reached out and found the ladder He clung

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to the bottom rung and waited in the water, getting his breath.

"Right, Matey?"

John nodded and began the climb.

In the shadow of the bulwarks were the hard lines of three cannon, four-pounders, according to Bolton. John squelched on deck, then began stripping off his pack and shirt. Water streamed from them as he laid them down. Bolton and Duma were only two black shapes in the shadows.

A knife glinted in the sailor's hand "Reckon they'll be in the after-cabin. This way " Bolton's bare feet slapped wetly as he went aft.

John motioned to Duma to stay on deck. Then he followed Bolton. The sailor looked up from the bottom of the stairs "Sound asleep, Matey. Everybody sleeps in this place. Let's get rid of them!"

Twenty minutes later the two bewildered guards, bound hand and foot, found themselves lying in the bottom of the *Catalpa's* boat. Bolton unfastened the painter and threw it down to them. He whispered something in Portuguese.

"What was that?" asked John.

The sailor showed his yellow teeth. "My compliments to the El Capitano," he said, and grinned.

A quick inspection of the ship showed the water barrels were full. There was one tub of biscuits and another of salt pork in the after-cabin. Enough for the voyage.

On deck, Bolton had cut the lashing from the big tiller aft. "Tops'l and heads'ls should be enough, Matey," he whispered.

Samuel Bolton

"Right," replied John. "We'll set the main later."

The lashings round the headsails were rotten and came away in his hands. The sail flapped loose and belied in the breeze. He shinned up the foremast and cut loose the foretop¹. Down below Duma heaved on the sheets, instructed by Bolton.

John dashed aft. "Right, Sam, I'll take the tiller. She'll go in this breeze. Cut the cable."

Bolton stumped aft. His knife flashed in the moonlight. The *Catalpa* dipped and swung. John hauled the tiller and steadied her. Sheets groaned in their blocks as Duma helped Bolton to trim the sails. The *Catalpa* gathered speed and set her bows at the wide entrance of the Bay.

John called to Bolton. "All right, Sam?" He felt a tremor of pride as the answer came back:

"Aye, aye, sir."

Ahead lay the open sea. . . .



CHAPTER TWELVE

* * *

The Slaver Again

HOT morning sunshine soaked up the dew from the deck and sent little sparkles of light shimmering through the spray flung up by the *Catalpa's* bows. An easy sea was running—no white-horses, just a smooth swell. John headed the little brigantine through it, keeping the sun to port.

He smiled happily at Duna. The big Zulu squatted on deck, basking in the sun and munching a ship's biscuit with some venison he had taken from his pack. It was a good sign. He had had a bad bout of seasickness. Now it looked as if he were over it.

Hands on his knees, Bolton straddled the breech of one of the four-pounders. He sucked at his empty pipe as he cocked an eye at the sails.

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"Fair galloping along," he grunted. "Hope the wind keeps!"

"Should do," commented John. "Have you been to Port Natal?"

"No. Never got down as far as that. Our run was mainly the Gulf and India. Small cargoes for John Company. Do you recognise the coast? Any marks?"

"Not a thing," replied John. "I don't know how long it'll take us. All we have to do is keep a look-out for a big green bluff. The settlement lies behind that."

"What if we pass it in the night?"

"Then I'll see some marks. I've been up the coast with the *Elizabeth*. If we go past, we'll just turn round and follow it back!"

"Seems sound enough," grunted Bolton.

John leaned his body against the tiller as the ship tried to come up into the wind. He held her there for a minute. The sails shook, then drew again. If this wind held the voyage could not be long! He tightened his grip on the tiller. Every minute was getting them closer to the settlement and his heart felt full at the thought.

Bolton got up and walked easily over the sloping deck. "You've had a long spell. I'll take over if you like. You get some sleep."

John looked up. "Thank you, Sam. Keep her as she is. I could do with a break."

He handed the tiller over to Bolton and, stretching, walked for'ward. Duma was sleeping now, wedged between the life-rail and the mast against the motion of the ship. John sat down on the warm deck. He took off his shirt and stuffed it under his head for a pillow. Then

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he forced his body against a hatch-cover, lay back and fell asleep.

He heard the shout from far away. He frowned in his sleep. Then spray splashed on his face and he woke with a start. Sam Bolton stood, smiling good-naturedly, at the tiller.

"Good sleep?"

John nodded drowsily. His face felt sticky as he rubbed it, and yawned. Then he got up and walked back to the tiller.

Duma was sitting on his haunches near Bolton. He was talking haltingly in English. Bolton chuckled.

"Do you see that?" he said.

"What was that?"

"Your feller here 'E's been talking to me all afternoon. Tellin' me about your march. He says anything you point that big gun of yours at is good as dead."

John blushed as he took over the wheel. "It's not as wonderful as all that." He grinned back.

"But 'e says you killed one of them elephants! Them big ones. I've seen 'em in India. Is that true? Did you kill one?"

John shot Duma a glance. "Well, yes. We did kill one," he said awkwardly.

"Phew!" ejaculated Bolton. "I thought he was pulling the long-bow." He went on: "Did you see many animals? And natives?"

But John was not listening. His eyes were fixed to windward. "Here, Sam," he cut in, "what do you make of that?"

Bolton was up and standing beside him.

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"Two-master. Brig. Not English. No Englishman sets a jib like that. A Spaniard, or a Frenchman, maybe."

"A Frenchman?"

"Yes, look at that main. Set like a washer-woman's skirt!"

The ship in sight was about five miles away, running close-hauled to windward of the *Catalpa* on an opposite course. John braced himself against the tiller and took a steady look. The sun was going down behind the land and the stranger looked only a little darker than the sky.

"Is there a glass below, Sam?"

"Aye. Do you want to take a closer look?"

"It might be as well. After all, she hasn't signalled us, has she? No gun-shot! No flag! I'm curious."

In a few minutes Sam was back with a telescope. John levelled it, keeping both eyes open as he had been taught. The stranger was rolling heavily as her spread of canvas urged her through the darkening sea. The glass brought her close and he swept her from stem to stern. A muscle twitched in his cheek.

That bow! The raking masts . . . yes, now he was sure. Look at that low waist! It was the slaver!

He pointed excitedly. "You see that, Duma? Remember?"

"Hau!" cried the Zulu, his eyes open and staring. "Is it the same ship, *Inkosi*?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter?" broke in Sam Bolton. "Do you know her?"

John told him in a few terse sentences what had hap-

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pened. The old sailor's jaw dropped as he listened.

"You did that?"

"Yes," rapped John. "What we need now is more sail—and quickly. If she decides on a chase, she'll outrun us whenever she likes."

"*Inkosi?*" Duma was scratching his woolly head.

"What, Duma?"

"That ship. What can she do? Hau! I threw all her fire-sticks in the water!" He chuckled as if at a private joke.

"She has the great fire-sticks in her sides, Duma. She can make much trouble for us with those," replied John soberly.

He turned to Bolton. "Look, Sam, we can crack more canvas on her and hope the wind doesn't get up. That's all. I'd like to lose that Frenchman tonight. We might be able to do it. I'll lash the tiller and go aloft. You help Duma on deck with the sheets and braces. All right?"

"If you say so, but she'll not carry it all if the wind rises. It'll take her sticks out."

"We'll have to chance that!" cried John as he swung into the shrouds.

Out on the top-gallant yard he did not bother with the knots of the lashings, but simply cut them loose. The sail crunched out and began thudding in the wind. He peered down and yelled: "Haul away!"

The sheets rumbled through the blocks as the two men below heaved. The sail billowed, then snapped taut. John ran to the mast and slipped down to the mainsail.

His knife sliced easily through the lashings, and he

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was on his way to the deck before the sail took the wind properly Bolton was glad of an extra hand at the main-sheets The big sail took some handling to get under control Then the sheet was finally cleated down

"I'll get aft," panted John "Braces now"

He cast the lashings from the tiller and took the strain as Bolton and Duma hauled on the yards, making the most of the wind The *Catalpa* seemed to catch her breath under this new press of canvas, and fairly leaped away, heeling over and sending water creaming and splashing over her gunwale

Holding on for grim death Duma and Bolton clawed their way aft

"Will she take it?"

"I think so!" yelled John "We're almost losing our friend already See how she's dropped astern?"

"With this blackness she'll be out of sight within half an hour!"

"I thank goodness for that!"

Duma was squatting against the bulwark his legs spread over the deck to counter the angle of the heel Old Sam sat unconcernedly on a gun Little sparks flew from his pipe as he sucked

The sea was quite dark Casting an eye astern, John glimpsed the bright bubbles of phosphorescence trickling in the *Catalpa's* wake He firmly held the little ship to her course

Back there, somewhere in the night, was a black brig, her holds now empty of miserable cargo On her quarter deck would be standing a black bearded man with a scar running down his cheek and a bandage on

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his right arm. He had sworn revenge, and he had looked the sort of man who would go to the ends of the earth to get it.

"We'd better split the watches, Skipper. Can't ask your feller, 'ere, to stand one."

"Right, Sam," replied John. "If you'll take over and give me a shout when you're tired."

Sam took the tiller, and John sat down gratefully beside Duma. "Are you all right, Duma?"

The Zulu's teeth flashed. "Yes, *Inkon*. Sickness finished now."

"Good. Don't walk about the deck—not with the ship heeling like this. I think you'd better stay here. Next to me." He could not afford to have the Zulu, unaccustomed as he was to life on board ship, chancing these pitching decks at night. He put a hand out and pressed Duma's shoulder. "Lie down and try to sleep."

The Zulu did not answer. He sat looking over the sloping deck to the dark swell and the invisible land beyond it—the land of desert and plain and wild beasts and witchcraft and storm, the land that made it hard to live and sometimes harder still to die, the land which bore him and made him an indivisible part of it.

John pulled his pack closer and lashed it to a deck-bolt. He punched a hollow for his head and lay down. Rigging thrummed in the breeze, blocks creaked and beneath him the little *Catalpa* seemed to sigh as she steadied herself before ploughing through the sweeping seas.

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John closed his eyes. It all depended on that black brig, pitching astern in the dark. The slaver—with no slaves. He half smiled to himself when he remembered he did not even know its name. The sky looked very dark.

"Show a leg—show a leg! Dawn in half an hour!"

John grunted, and opened his eyes. Had the night gone so quickly? His face felt powdery stiff. He rubbed it, yawned and sat up. He rubbed his face again and looked at his hand—salt from the spray!

"How do you feel?"

Old Sam Bolton was still at the tiller. John shot a quick look round. The *Catalpa* was sailing well under a wind that had increased slightly. A glimmer of silver showed over the eastern horizon.

He stretched his legs and walked aft, feeling a twinge of guilt for having slept most of the night.

"You should have woken me sooner, Sam. I must have slept the whole night. I didn't mean you to stand so long a watch!"

"That's all right," grinned Sam. "It's been fun enough up here. I'm not tired." He stood aside and John took the tiller. "A long watch gives a man time to think sometimes. You know, about things."

John grinned back. "Yes, I know. We were short-handed coming up from the Cape. Worked watch and watch. Four on—four off."

Sam sucked at his pipe. "Long time since I did that. Off Toulog, it was."

"Long time ago?"

"A few years. With the Fleet."

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"Nelson?" John asked, excitement in his voice.

"No, not Nelson—him an' his one eye No, I was with the best of the bunch "

"The best? I thought that

"Cocky! He was the best I was with 'im in the *Speedy*."

"Cocky? Who was he?"

"Tom Cochrane Lord Cochrane they called him But he was always 'Cocky' to us ' Sam walked to leeward and spat "Nothing was too big for 'im Nothing He would have took more prizes before breakfast than the rest of your Lord Admirals took in a lifetime ' The old sailor's voice grew reminiscent Aye, he really were a Captain an' no mistake Why, the *Speedy* weren't no larger than this un 'Is first command, I remember There were forty of us, officers and all We'd been taking prizes in the Med for about three weeks, when one morning—a morning just like this it was—up comes a Spanish frigate A real big un, fifty guns twenty fours, and us with our ten four pounders

John took his eyes from the leech of the mainsail for a moment "Four pounders?"

' Aye Popguns Cocky called em Sam grinned to himself "Well," he went on, "there he stood on the quarter-deck, big nose like a stein lamp, and shouts 'Well, my lads?' We all cheered No running for the *Speedy*! What a captain he was Ole Cocky! We blacked our faces, ran alongside and boarded Them Spaniards thought as we were ghosts, running at em through the gun-smoke It was all over in half-an-

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hour. And Cocky was first over-side. Always in front, he was. It was always, 'This way, my lads, follow me!' with him. And another thing—there was no flogging on the *Speedy*. And we had the best disciplined crew in the Fleet. He really was a one, he was."

John eased the helm as the *Catalpa* bit into a swell "What happened to him? I never heard of him in the fleet."

"Before your time, I suppose. He had a quarrel with the Admiralty fellers and went ashore. Left the Service. I heard from ole Ted, that died of fever at the Bay, that Cocky had left England. Went to South America. The fleet lost a good man when he went—I can tell you that!"

In the east the sun fought a losing battle with the cloud. It dribbled, a pale yellow, into the dark sea and carried no warmth. The horizon was lighter now. John pushed his knee against the tiller and took out his telescope. There was nothing to sea-ward. He turned to sweep the coast, and something rose from a swell astern.

He gripped the telescope tightly and steadied it. One—no, two masts struck into the sky under a press of canvas. The slaver, with every sail set!

"What is it?"

"The slaver, Sam. She's catching us fast. Can you see her now?"

"Aye, aye. Look at her! We'll never out-sail her the rate she's going!"

John felt his heart pounding. They could not run and they could not hide. There was only one thing to

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do. "We'll have to try to knock a stick out of her, Sam, then run for it. Think you can still lay a gun?" John looked at the old sailor.

Sam spat over the side. "She won't be in range afore an hour. I'll load the whole lot. Will you tell your feller to help?"

"I'll explain to him," said John. He called to Duma as Sam ducked below.

The Zulu's eyes widened as John told him what to do. He pointed to the guns on deck. "These big fire-sticks, *Inkosi*?"

"Yes, Duma. Help the *umlungu*. They make a great noise but you've heard them before, when the ships arrive at the settlement."

"Right, *Inkosi*," replied Duma

Old Sam's head stuck through the hatch. "Tell him to put one of these near each gun!" he cried. "Then come back for the ball."

John spoke rapid Zulu. Duma rolled up and down the deck, putting a paper cartridge near each of the ten four-pounders. Sam dumped a canvas bag on deck, and then appeared with a bucket. Something in it was smoking. He pointed to it and yelled. "Slow match!"

John nodded and glanced back at the slaver. She was close now, and he could make out individual figures on her deck. He found himself wondering how the sentry felt.

Sam thrust a cartridge, wad, ball and wad down the barrel of each gun, and left Duma to ram them home with the scrubbed wood ramrod. The Zulu disdained

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the use of breeching tackle in running them out again—he simply put his big hands to the breech and pushed! John motioned to him to tighten the breeching lines. If they were loose when the gun discharged, they might easily snap. Then he would have a loose gun charging round the decks, the terror in every gunner's dreams.

"That does it! All loaded now Ball only, no canister or grape in the magazine. It will have to do, I suppose!"

"Pray that it works!" said John to himself. Then aloud: "We should be in range any minute now!"

As if in answer, a faint, double boom echoed across the water. A puff of white smoke appeared in the slaver's side and was whisked away by the wind. A little fountain of spray spouted whitely, a hundred yards astern.

"What does she carry?"

"Eights, I think, Sam. It was dark, so I couldn't see much. But I think they were eights."

He felt a tremor as he spoke. An eight-pounder ball smashing into the *Catalpa* would send up a shower of splinters which would scythe along the deck in a deadly sweep. He had seen it happen before. They had to get one of the slaver's masts down. It was then only hope!

Another boom rolled out from the enemy. The splash was closer this time—not quite twenty yards away.

"That was near. Reckon he's got the range!"

"Do you think we could reach him, Sam?"

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"With our little fours? Not likely!" Sam paused. "Not, that is, unless I gave an extra charge."

John grappled with this suggestion as he held the *Catalpa* driving forward. An extra charge!—Extra powder in the breech that would send the ball further. It would give them a chance, but the gun might burst. Jagged pieces of bronze could cut all three of them down before they had a chance to fight.

"I think she'd take it. Breech looks thick enough. Sturdy 'fours' these are. I'll try the stern-chaser. All right?"

"It's up to you, Sam," said John.

The old sailor rammed down a cartridge and broke open another. He poured half the contents down the breech. He held out his hand to Duma and took a wad and a ball. He rammed these home and pushed a wad on top of them. John looked down apprehensively. The breech was not two feet from his legs as he stood at the tiller. Sam poured some powder into the touch-hole from the small flask strapped at his side, and crouched over the breech.

He took the slow match and grinned up at John.

"We'll try a 'frog' shot!"

"What's that?"

"Try to get down her foremast." He sighted along the barrel, slow match ready.

"Stand by!"

John opened his mouth. The touch hole fizzled, spurted—and the gun exploded. He felt a huge bronze door slam in his face, acrid smoke burn his eyes and choke his throat.

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The smoke swirled away. There was silence.

"Missed, I reckon!" shouted Sam. "No time for a second, now, though! Broadside fire! Look, there she goes!"

Five puffs of smoke blossomed in the slaver's side as she came broadside on.

John saw two splashes, heard the booming and felt the little ship tremble. The foremast shook. A ball had passed clean through it.

He eased the helm. They could not tack, go about and fight the guns. All they could do was run on this course and hope for the best. The slaver was close now—not a hundred yards away—chugging along under full sail.

"Stand by! Independent action!" Sam was shouting old Navy orders to himself as he crouched by Number One gun. The touch hole fizzed and he was running to the second cannon. Then to the third.

One after the other they crashed out. Biting smoke billowed past and John put a hand over his face. Two splashes! A shower of white stuff amid ship! One hit anyway. Little figures were running about the slaver's deck.

Sam and Dumma were shouting frantically. More puffs came from the slaver and something cracked aloft. The *Catalpa* hesitated in full career.

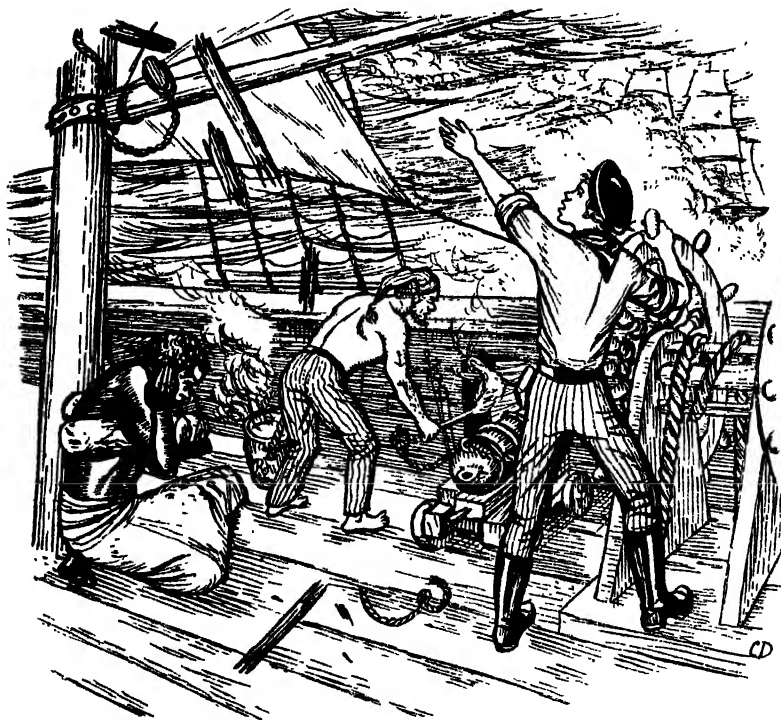
"Look out, Sam—Dumma! She's going—the mizzen!"

Both men leaped forward as the mast, shot through, swayed drunkenly. John held fast to the tiller, watching the tearing, rending wood. A stay snapped and

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from aloft a block hurtled into the water. The mast flopped down with a snap and trailed over the side.

The slaver fired another ragged broadside. The *Catalpa* trembled under the shock of the hits. The slaver was too close to miss now. Then the four-



pounders crashed out again. Sam was running from gun to gun like a madman, Duma, crouched by the mast, looked a little amazed, but as brave as a lion. He had a cartridge under each arm and his fingers in his ears. The noise was deafening. A great hole appeared

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high in the slaver's side. Something black leaped up, then crashed through the bulwarks.

"You see that! We hit one of her guns. That'll show them!"

Sam was yelling madly as he worked excitedly at the four-pounders. John struggled to keep the *Catalpa* to the wind, but the smashed mirzen dragged her remorselessly round.

"I can't hold her, Sam!" he yelled. "She's coming round!"

He snatched a look at the slave. Two puffs came from her side. Then suddenly she heeled right over. Her mainyard dipped almost into the water. She staggered up, wallowing. John jumped as he saw a murky line slide across the sea.

"Hold on!" he screamed. "Hold on!"

Sam jerked up, stared, then jumped at the mast. Duna leaped after him. He just managed to get a grip when the squall struck, a fierce Indian Ocean wind that seemed to come out of the sea itself.

The little ship went over—over—agonisingly. Water creamed over her bulwarks, poured across her decks and wetted the powder lying ready at her guns.

John felt the howling wind batter at his ear-drums. He wiped a hand at the lashing spray and strove to hold the jolting tiller. His feet slipped on the sloping deck and he felt an avalanche of water hammer at his shoulders. Then he was hanging on to the lee-shrouds for dear life.

The driving rain blotted out the slaver. The wind behind gave the drops a cutting edge as they scythed

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across the water-logged decks. The *Catalpa* heaved and foam swirled through her gun-ports.

John battled back to the tiller. Two loud reports echoed aloft. The mainsails and topsails had blown out, leaving empty bolt-ropes thrashing in the shrieking wind. The ship was lifeless.

Clutching the weather bulwarks, Duma and Sam clawed their way aft. Sam yelled against the wind:

"She's done for now! Not riding! Think we've had a shot 'twixt wind and water."

John blinked his smarting eyes. Little droplets of water clung to Duma's woolly head. The poor Zulu looked bewildered and completely lost.

"If the sails hadn't gone, we'd be over!" shouted John. He strained his eyes through the driving rain. He could not see a thing.

"What's the coast like here, Sam? Rock or sand?"

Bolton cupped his hands against the wind. "Not sure. Lot of it's sandy!"

A white line of tumbling surf cut suddenly through the rain.

"Look!" screamed John. "We're closer than I thought! Get your stuff together!" he shouted in Zulu to Duma.

The *Catalpa* buried her bows in a mass of foam.

"Stand by! Here're the breakers now!"



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

* * *

A Tragedy

DUMA dived across the heeling deck. He grabbed up both packs and the rifle. His great brown arm wrapped itself round the stump of the mizzen and he clung there, panting, like a brown rock in a snarling torrent. A foaming breaker swooped up under the stern and hoisted the *Catalpa* dizzily on its crest.

Seizing his opportunity, Duma lunged across. He slipped and crashed, arms flailing, against the bulwark.

John bent and snatched his pack. The straps felt wet as he forced his arms through them. He pulled the sling of his rifle tighter. The *Catalpa* swung broadside on, gripped in the teeth of the foaming surf.

"Her bow's under!" yelled Sam. "Look at that

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wave! Look out!" His voice ended in a shriek.

A booming comber, shaggy-headed, thundered over the ship, burying her stem under tons of water. She dipped and shuddered under this fresh onslaught. Her stern pointed crazily into the angry sky. Duma had his knee on the bulwark.

John hammered on his shoulder. "Not yet!" he yelled against the howling wind "Knife!"

He tugged out his knife and brandished it as he pointed upwards to the rigging. Duma nodded his head vigorously and his hand went to his belt. John compressed his lips. Anyone caught under that rigging when she went over, would be killed.

The shore was only a tangle of sand through the spray. The ship rolled again. Over she went, mainyard thrusting into the surf. A gun, its tackle snapped, tumbled and slewed across the deck, before it crashed through the bulwark.

He clung desperately to the taffrail as another foaming monster roared across the waste of water. The ship shuddered. Down below, great beams snapped and splintered under the enormous pressure. Her fabric crunched.

"She's hit! she's hit!" he shouted.

Old Sam Bolton's eyes were two watery grey lights in the spume-flecked air. He pointed wildly at a murderous wall of water.

"Wait for this one! Now! Here she——"

The ship smashed under the blow. A mountain of foam billowed across her decks, then the wave struck. Her timbers started and broke up. The mizzen, its bed

A Tragedy

smashed, was torn out like an old rotten tooth and went spinning madly into the surf. Duma was gone. The stern whirled crazily round. There went Sam. John gritted his teeth.

Suddenly he felt himself sucked upwards and tossed head-over-heels. He struggled desperately, his lungs bursting, in the foaming maelstrom.

He heard the shrieking crescendo hammer at his ear-drums. His feet would not obey the urgent call of his muscles. He felt himself falling, the pressure of the turbulent water pounding at his lungs. He experienced a flash of agonising pain as he thudded on his shoulder.

His eyes opened on the dark water, but screwed up against the swirling grit of the seabed. High above the breakers boomed and pounded on their thunderous gallop to the beach. Pressure waves burst downwards, sucking and pulling at his body, grinding it like a puppet under some huge watery heel. His exhausted breath was now a red ache in his lungs. He felt the under-tow wrap round his body and lunge forward.

Then he was being nudged along, sand scraping into his thigh.

He found himself lying on the shore, retching the salt-water from his lungs. He struggled to his elbows, croaked and fell. A small wave rippled over him, the dregs of a comber that had spent its strength. He lifted his head and blinked.

The dry beach was only yards away!

He elbowed his battered body forward. The sharp sand rasped at his torn flesh, making every movement

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of hands and knees a torment. His elbow^h felt as if it was going to buckle again. His hand touched dry sand. The next few yards were torture. His head swam and waves of blackness came and went with the thunder of the darkening surf. He felt himself falling . . falling . . .

Drums thundered outside the door he stood bare-footed in front of it, the bare flagstones cold under his feet. His hands groped frantically for a handle. His heart pounded. There must be a way out. There had to be! Where was the handle? He doubled his fists and battered frantically on the solid timber.

The door moved slowly. The drums grew louder and it swung open. The light was blinding. . .

He blinked his eyes and his mind clambered back into consciousness as he lay, staring across the sand at the booming, surf-beaten beach.

The lock-gates of memory slid back as he lay there, blinking, conscious of his aching thighs and throbbing head. The slaver! The fight and the wreck! He remembered it all.

His eyes snapped open. Duma! Sam! Where were they?

His fingers dug into the sand. His elbows straightened and he dragged himself on to his knees. The pack slipped down his arms and the trigger-guard of the rifle dug into his side. He eased it back and stood unsteadily on the desolate beach, breathing heavily through blistered lips.

A Tragedy

Where should he start? Which way should he walk. All around were only those same dazzling humps of white sand. His throat tightened as he turned his eyes sea wards. On the beach, near the tide line, lay timber broken beams, a splintered piece of spar all that remained of the little *Catalpa*.

His shoulders hunched. He had to try somewhere. He ploughed through the sand, stumbling along the line of breakers. At the top of each low hummock he squinted against the light. Nothing but sand, white sand! He felt a wave of loneliness sweep over him.

It had been like this the first time he had set foot on the deck of a man o' war. Then it had been the decks that were dazzling white, scrubbed and snowed, and the guns, black, with scarlet muzzles, their breeching hues yellow against the holy stoned timber.

He tensed his arms. But there had been men on that ship, the Officer of the Watch aloof, all blue and gold and the men on the fore-sle. But here there was no one. Not a soul! He was alone on a deserted beach with only the sad seagulls for company.

He blundered forward in a shambling run. He had to find them. The salt caked on his eyelids made his eyes smart as he blinked again, the light and salt tears rolling down his face. His legs felt jelly like and loose. He plodded up a dune, tripped, and fell headlong into the sand. The blood pounding through his head almost deafened the hoarse cry from the bush.

"*Inkosi! Inkosi!*" It trailed off into silence.

John jerked his head and spat sand from his blistered lips. There was no mistaking Duma's tall brown

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figure! It was sharply outlined against the beach as he plunged across.

"Duma!"

"*Inkosi!* I went the other way Up there To look for you And here you are Oh, *Inkosi!*"

John's hands were trembling He felt a hard ball choke his throat.

Duma held out something "Look, here is your pack I saw it lying on the beach

John swallowed His cracked lips split into an unbelieving grin of relief

"You're safe! Safe! Duma! I thought I was alone Now—oh, thank God! he cried in English "Thank God for that!"

He put out a hand and gripped the Zulu's arm Duma's mouth widened into a smile and he pointed up the beach

"I have been far up the shore There is no one there"

"Maybe the *umlungu* will be this way Let us see 'Can you walk, *Inkosi!*'

"Yes, I'm all right now

"Maybe he won't be far

But the sun was nearly overhead before John shouted Old Sam did not hear the first time Then he turned sharply as Duma's high pitched yell rent the air His bare arms went up in a gesture of joy

"Matey, I thought you were dead I can't believe it's true. I thought you were dead! And me, all alone on a deserted coast, hundreds of miles from a Christian soul"

A Tragedy

The old man's eyes sparkled. "Oh, glad it is I am to see you. Right glad" He thumped Duma's shoulder. "And your feller, here, too. What's the plan now? Walk back?"

"Have to," replied John. "Nothing else for it. We'd better make for the bush. How are you feet?"

"Lead the way," grinned Sam. "I'll be all right."

John turned. "What do you think, Duma?"

His companion chewed his lip. "Best through the bush, *Inkon*. There is no water on this beach, and no food. Besides, it is easier to walk on the plains."

"Right," grinned John. "We have far to go. Let's get in the shade and make a plan. I must clean my rifle, too. And see what the powder's like. He led the way over the burning sand towards the thick bush.

The greased bag had withstood the onslaught of the water. The powder was dry as a bone. He took out his pistols, stuck them in his belt, and ran a piece of oiled rag over his rifle, then loaded it. Duma fumbled in his pack and wrinkled his nose. "Han! Look, *Inkon*!" he grunted.

The venison was green and rotten, and it stank.

"Can't eat that," said John. "I throw it away."

The Zulu tossed it disgustedly into the surrounding trees.

"Right," said John, standing up. "Now we can make a start!"

"Give me something to carry, lad." Old Sam's voice was quiet.

"It's all right, Sam," replied John. "Don't worry. Save yourself for the march. Besides, this pack isn't

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heavy. Practically nothing in it, now—only the medicine and some ball ”

“As you say, lad,” returned Sam “But you let me know when you’re tired ”

John shot him a grateful glance He lugged out his cutlass and began to cut the rail

The first few miles were fairly easy going But after that, the vegetation grew thick and matted together Everything felt wet, and dripped in the clammy heat Even the ground squelched underfoot He wrinkled his lips as he strove to force a way He had experienced nothing like this before It was back breaking work!

Later, Duma stopped, panting for breath “Hau! he exclaimed “This is bad country, *Inkosi* Have you noticed? ’

“No animals ” grunted John

“That is what I mean, *Inkosi* No animals live here No birds Nothing to eat This is a place for reptiles, snakes and insects We must hurry to the plain There we can eat, and see where we are going

He slashed at the jungle with redoubled efforts

Deeper in the bush, the vegetation was loathsome Slimy unseen things crawled underfoot Thin trunks creepers, even the dead leaves, were covered in a slimy coating

John glanced down at his body with a shudder As he moved, the stuff brushed off on to him, and covered his limbs with a clammy film

The march dragged on throughout the day By nightfall he felt exhausted The grey swamp seemed to have sucked the life out of him

A Tragedy

"We'd better camp here, Duma. We'll rest, then try to go on. We must reach the plain. Much more of this and we'll all be dead."

There was no food and only a little water from Duma's bottle. Worst of all, there was no fire. The wood was so damp it would not burn.

John threw himself down. He put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes. His back ached, and his cutlass-arm felt as if it did not belong to him any more. He glanced at the undergrowth.

That stuff was tougher than it looked. It was like trying to cut wet, twisted rag. This was almost as bad as the mountain. Duma was watching Sam intently. The old seaman was sharpening the Zulu's cutlass with a small whetstone.

"We'll put a Navy edge on this feller," grunted the old seaman. "Sharp enough to split the forebrace at a stroke."

Duma did not understand what the seaman was saying, but he nodded and smiled just the same. John grinned to himself as he watched the whetstone moving smoothly up and down the bright blade.

Leaves rustled as he twisted. He might as well do his own. It needed it after a day's work like this. As his hand closed over the hilt, Duma screamed.

John glimpsed a splinter of light flicker on a flat spade-head. A ripple flung through several black coils, half-concealed in the leaves, and suddenly John's leg caught fire.

Whispering little tongues of flame started curling up his bare skin. Saliva streamed into his mouth, al-

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most choking him. Mamba! he thought, wildly. He had been bitten by the Death Snake! His back arched.

Duma yelled in Zulu to Sam. He must have made signs as well, for John felt his leg cramped in the vice-like grip of two great hands. A knife flashed. He winced as he felt it slice deep into his flesh. Through blurred eyes, he saw Duma put his mouth to the wound, and felt him suck.

The Zulu straightened, spat, then sucked again. Sam's grip never relaxed.

Duma spoke rapidly.

"What's he say, lad? What's he say! 'Tell me, be- for it's too late!'" Sam was shouting, urgently.

"Fire," whispered John. The pain was agonising, clamping his jaws together. "We—must—have a fire!"

He fell back against the tree-trunk. This wood would not light for they had already tried it. Ten minutes, Duma had said. That was how long a man would live after he had been bitten by a mamba. He felt bubbles forming on his lips. Ten minutes!

A fresh pair of hands tightened on his leg.

"Hold him still," grunted Sam in English. "I'll pour this in. 'Tis the only way. Bite hard, lad. Now!"

John caught a vague glimpse of the pistol in Sam's hand. It snapped and a red sheet of pain engulfed him to his hips. He croaked in agony and his stomach ridged hard as iron.

He felt a wave break over him, was conscious of fire coursing through his body, then blackness shut down like a blind.

A Tragedy

The first thing he saw next day was a huge brown leg. He looked up at Duma's smiling face. It came closer.

"You are all right, *Iukon!* The *umlungu* made magic with the bite!"

"What—" John bit his lip as the throbbing in his leg jangled against his torn nerves. He sat up and stared. There was a black, two-inch hole in his skin. He cried out as he tried to move.

Sam squelched across. He had on a pack and rifle, and the cutlass in his hands.

The old seaman bent his head.

"You won't be able to walk lad. Not today, anyway. Duma's going to carry you. I'll cut trail."

"No, no," muttered John. "I'll be all right. I'll be able to . . ."

The throbbing in his leg raced, jamming his lips together.

"Don't you worry, lad," grunted Sam "You'll be fine. Give it a day or two."

He hitched at his pack-straps. 'Duma sucked out the poison last night. Then he needed a fire to cauterize the wound. I had to burn some power in your leg. It was the only way!"

John looked up. Duma's hands were under his arm-pits, lifting him. He sprawled across the Zulu's broad back and his leg raced again, turning his knee into a hard ball of pain.

The march was a nightmare. The Zulu's great muscles bulged, and his broad back stooped as he squelched after Sam, hour after hour. The cutlass in

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front worked unceasingly—cut, slash, hack—as the seaman carved a way through the resilient grey wilderness.

After a while, John's leg grew numb. Pins and needles prickled the skin, then the nerves went to sleep. Duma panted under him, his lungs gasping down the foetid air as he sank, knee-deep sometimes, into the swampy ground.

Later, John forced his mind back to consciousness as Duma swayed to a stop. He shook his head. They must have been going for hours. What little sun there was, shone directly overhead.

The Zulu turned. "You hear, *Inkon?*"

Sam panted about five yards ahead sweat rolling down his bare, hairy chest.

"What is it?"

"Listen!" grunted Duma. "There!"

High above came the metallic call of a bird. John opened his eyes wider. A bird! The first they had heard since the march through the swamp had begun.

"That bird, Sam," he said. "Do you hear it?"

"Aye. What of it, lad?"

"It means we're getting near the plain. That was a guinea-fowl!"

"Then let's move!" shouted Sam. "Let's move!" His cutlass flashed as he stamped forward. Duma's muscles hardened as the Zulu drew fresh strength from this sign. His back seemed to grow wider as he plunged after Sam. John felt his left foot bumping on Duma's thigh as the big Zulu heaved and strained through the swamp.

A Tragedy

About three hours later, the Zulu lifted his head and sniffed. The smell seemed to put new life in him and he lunged ahead with redoubled vigour. Sam was still in front, cutting and hacking a path. John lifted his eyes to the broad figure in the jungle. The old sea man had never faltered all the long day.

He took a breath. There was no mistaking that scent. It was green and sweet and it meant the freshness and juiciness of the plains ahead.

Sam shouted as he hacked away the last curtain of undergrowth. A strangled noise issued from Duma's throat. He thrust past the creepers and stopped short gasping. All around them lay the shadowed plain, hard, firm and wide.

Duma turned his head. 'Now *Inkosi*,' he panted, "now it will be better."

John lay back on the soft grass as his companions made camp. The numbness in his leg had gone, but the throbbing which replaced it was not so sharp now. He forced his body upright and bent to look at the wound.

"How's it feel, lad?" Sam shot the question as he tended the little fire.

John poked at the angry flesh with his fore finger. "It's not too bad, Sam. But—look at this!" Sam walked across and frowned at the small black ball, no bigger than a sixpence, which had risen just under the wound. John felt his leg gently. "Yes, Sam, that's the part that's sore—that swell'g." He fought back a wince as he fingered it.

Sam rubbed his nose. 'Duma will be back soon

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We'll see what he says about it. How do you feel, otherwise? It was a nasty shock you had last night "

John grinned ruefully. "Not too bad now, Sam, thanks. I should be able to walk on this leg tomorrow. Duma must be nearly dead with lugging me around!"

Sam shot him a look. "He's a one, that feller of yours. Thinks the world of you . . ." He glanced up as a shout echoed across "Look! Here he comes now—with a rabbit, too. Dinner tonight and water to drink!"

A smile broke across the Zulu's face when he saw John's leg. He pointed to the swelling. "The poison, *Inkosi*, has come to the top. We must cut it and let it out. Then we will put this on. Like we did the time you were burned!" He held out a handful of wet clay.

John's hand went back and grasped his knife. He gave it to Duma, who held the blade in the fire for a moment. He handed it back. "One cut, *Inkosi*. That's all."

John put the point to the swelling, gritted his teeth and pushed. He felt an excruciating pain shoot up his leg. He held his breath, tensed. Then a wave of calm ran over the wound. He opened his eyes and looked down.

The black poison trickling down his skin was being squeezed and kneaded out by Duma. It began to show red and soon good clean blood was flowing from the gash. Duma poured some water over it. "Better now, *Inkosi*!" he cried proudly. "Oh ho! Look. Clean! Now I will put some of the medicine on. Tomorrow, you will see."

A Tragedy

The Zulu packed a handful of clay on the wound and bound it with a piece of rag. He patted the dressing, then turned his attention to the rabbit.

An hour later, John ate gratefully. The rabbit was soon picked clean.

Next morning he was able to limp along. Sam still carried the pack, but he was able to manage his rifle. From a long talk with Duma the previous night, he was fairly certain that they were somewhere south of the Tongas, between the Tongas and the lake.

If they went south, it would mean passing through Chaka's country again. And worse, the AmaBatnas lay south of the Zulu king's lands. He still remembered his blood-stained hat on the ground.

Only one course was left—west, through Swaziland, then south into the settlement. It would take a few more days. But, according to Duma, Swaziland was easy going, and if they were careful they would not be seen.

He limped along in the Zulu's wake, Sam panting beside him. The old sailor felt the terrible heat badly and Duma had made a straw hat for his head. The sun did not affect Sam's bare skin. A life time at sea had burned him as brown as a walnut.

This was grassland—wide open grassland. The horizon in the blue distance was clear, unblocked by any mountains. Little patches of bush studded the plain, like gentle oases in a desert. It was for one of these that John made.

He helped Sam cut a space for the camp while Duma foraged.

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"Them settlers at Port Natal," began Sam "What do they do there?"

John laid down an armful of grass. "Oh, they trade and hunt. I don't know much about it, but I think they've each got a piece of land. You know, for growing things."

Sam scratched his head. "Well, I've been thinking. Without the old *Catalpa* I'm sunk, good and proper. I wouldn't mind settling at Port Natal. Do you think I could get some land there?"

John frowned. "I don't know, Sam. I suppose so. You could ask when we get back. Lieutenant King will help you. I know that." He glanced at the old man. "Why, Sam? Don't you want to go back to England?"

"What, me?" Sam grinned. "Not really. It's all right for fellers like you. Know what I mean? You'll be an officer in the fleet one day. Command a ship of the line maybe. You've got learning. But me? No use going back to the fleet. It's no life on the lower deck. You know that. Not unless you've someone like ole Cocky for a skipper. And there're none of his sort left. No, I'd rather die here in a big country than end my days in a workhouse near the river."

He looked up as he piled logs on a small fire. "Reckon I'll ask, when we get back. Reckon I will." He rubbed his hands together as he blew on the blaze.

"*Inkosi!* A big kudu! Near this bush!"

John snapped up. Duma was gesticulating about twenty yards away.

"Round the back?"

"Yes! Meat for many days!"

A Tragedy

John lurches to his feet and picked up his rifle. He proved the priming and thumbed back the hammers. Kudu grew big as oxen. They could never eat all the meat. Normally, he would have left it, but now they needed food. They might have to wait a long time for something smaller.

"Will you be all right, lad?" Sam's voice was tense with excitement.

"Hope so, Sam," whispered John "Depends if I can get close enough."

His luck held. He was downwind when the kudu walked into sight. It was only thirty yards away. The forelegs were wide apart as the long neck leaned towards the grass. The horns were curved and strong, the white stripes showed clearly on the brown hide.

John leaned against a tree and steadied his rifle. The explosion startled a host of small birds nesting high above, and he winced as his injured leg took the weight of his body for a second.

The kudu kicked nervously in the grass then lay still.

"Oh, well done, lad. Well done," cried Sam. "I've never seen the likes of it before. Clean as a whistle. I'll help your feller skin it."

"Right, Sam!" called John. "I'll cut some stakes."

He had only managed to cut two stakes when Duma appeared with the first joint. John pushed them into the earth as Duma dumped the haunch down.

"He is a big one, *Inkosi!* *Ubul!*"

John smiled. "Meat for many's days, Duma."

He looked past the Zulu. "Where is the *umlungu?*"

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"He is bringing another piece, *Inkosi*. He is a strong one that. All yesterday he cut trail without stopping."

"I'll go and help him, Duma," said John. "Will you tend the fire?"

Duma nodded assent and bent over the flames.

John had not gone twenty yards towards the kill when he heard a familiar cough. He stiffened as an agonising scream rent the evening silence. He stumbled towards the dead kudu. Another scream choked off into horrible silence.

John kept yelling for Duma and the rifle. His leg jangled painfully, then he tripped and fell. He struggled to his feet, and rounded the little clump of trees. The old seaman was nowhere in sight.

John's eyes widened. A bunch of yellow and black was crouching over something lying in the grass near the kudu. It coughed and snarled deep in its throat.

As John yelled, the lion raised its huge head and opened its mouth. Its furry jaws were red and wet.

"*Boebes, Inkosi! Boebes!*" Duma thrust the rifle forward.

"Quick, *Inkosi!*"

The lion, startled, was on its feet. The maned head swung to one side as it broke away from the pathetic figure on the grass.

John felt a wave of anger flood through him. He flung up his rifle and jerked the trigger. The lion threw out a paw and roared. He had missed! Anxious, he aimed and fired into the yellow fur again. The lion swung round and bounded away through the long grass.

A Tragedy

John felt a blackness settle round his heart.

Deep down he knew the truth, even before he saw the figure properly. The arms were bent at a curious angle. The head . . . He looked away and thudded his rifle-butt on the ground. His chest heaved.

Duma walked forward and peered down. He turned his head. "He is dead, *Inkosi* "

John felt his heart beat a long roll against his ribs, and he felt tears on his cheeks. Old Sam. He had wanted to start a new life, too, out here. John coughed harshly and dragged his thumb hard against his mouth.

The grass swished against Duma's legs as he walked back to get his cutlass. It was all there was to dig a grave

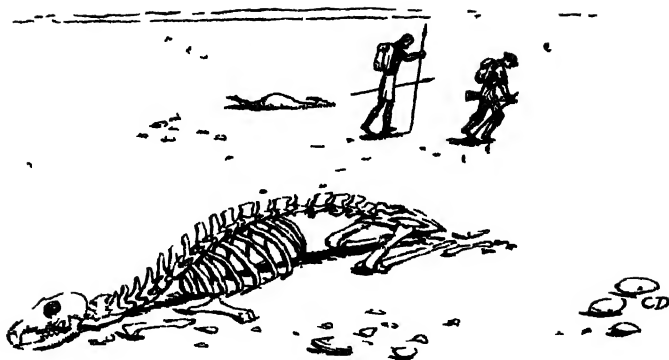
The moon was up when he finished the prayer. He blinked as he looked down at the stone-covered mound, the two saplings lashed together in a crude cross. There was nothing else to be done.

Old Sam was lying alone, eight thousand miles from the land he had fought for. Alone under the stars with the night-noises of Africa for his requiem

Duma murmured something at his side.

"Yes, Duma," replied John, his voice thick "The *umlungu* was a great warrior. One of the greatest from my land."

They walked slowly back to the camp.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

* * *

Drought

NEXT morning they started at sunrise. John walked straight from the camp, with Duma beside him, and did not turn his head as he passed the lone grave under the trees.

This way was very dry, and he was suddenly glad he had filled his water-bottle at the stream before leaving. There was no tell tale sheen of water throughout the long trek ahead. The grass was a harsh yellow and crackled underfoot.

"Strange about that kudu, *Inkosi*," volunteered Duma. "Only one. And he was not an old buck."

John chewed this over before replying. Kudu usually ran in herds; forty or more under the leadership of a buck. This leadership was challenged from time to

Drought

time by younger ones. If the challenge was successful, the leader was banished from the herd to walk alone until, muscles tardy and speed slowed, he fell prey to a leopard or a lion.

But the kudu last night had been fairly young, in his prime.

"Why do you think he was by himself, Duma?"

"I don't know, *Inkosi*. If he was the leader he would be the strongest. If they were running he would outdistance all the rest. If they were searching, he would outlast them. What was this one doing? Running? The others would have caught up by now. But we have seen none. Searching? What for, *Inkosi*?"

"Fresh food?"

"I don't think so. No, *Inkosi*. When I skinned this buck his belly was full of water. Also he walked slowly as he ate, he had drunk so much. I think he had found water."

John pursed his lips at this ominous conclusion. Water! Had the buck been looking for water? Duma might be right, but the plain hereabouts was parched. He plucked a blade of grass. It crumbled to powder between his finger and thumb.

He experienced a tremor of foreboding. Animals could go for days without water. And an animal could travel further in a day than any man.

His mouth was suddenly dry and he reached instinctively for the water-bottle at his side. But he snatched back his hand and took hold of the rifle-strap. If Duma was right they would need every drop.

It was late afternoon when the Zulu saw it. All John

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could see were two legs that thrust from the grass like thin brown sticks into the sky. He plodded for several minutes then he swallowed in horror.

The dead kudu doe was only a bleated brown hide, covered in crawling blue flies. Her legs stuck grotesquely from her distended body and a hard black tongue protruded out of her mouth. John looked away quickly.

That poor beast must have suffered agony in her fruitless search. He knew how she must have felt. He knew what it was to suffer thirst. The blazing sun sent little trickles of salt running down his forehead as he stood near the dead doe in the long grass. For her, Africa had brought its reckoning and extorted its harsh payment.

Something moved by his feet. He stiffened and his throat grew tight.

The little calf was still alive, too weak to move. It lay in the grass next to its dead mother, its brown eyes wide open and staring. Duma murmured. John winced. This was horrible. He stepped forward and bent down, his hand tight round the pistol-butt. The report cracked away through the grass.

Smoke hung wreathed in the windless afternoon. They could still smell it twenty yards away. John took one quick look back. Those poor beasts! Then he ploughed after Duma.

A merciless sun beat down from the polished blue bowl of the sky. The flaming plain seemed endless and bare. Yet, by sunset, they had counted five more kudu, two young bucks and three does. There had been no

Drought

sign of their calves. The moon was well up before they lowered themselves wearily to the grass. John shouldered aside his pack and bent forward, easing his aching back, arms crossed over his knees. He tried to reason, to think. But his brain felt fagged and battered.

How far had the kudu come? Where was the next water likely to be? He shook his water-bottle. They would not be able to last more than two days! He put the bottle to his mouth and wet his lips. A table-spoonful slipped down his rasped throat. He felt a wild urge to drink the lot, but thrust this temptation from him.

Duma chewed on a blade of dry grass. He did not bring out any of the roasted, salted kudu. It would only create a thirst.

"Maybe tomorrow, *Inkosu*," he grunted. "The kudu might have come from the north. We might . . ." his voice trailed off.

Next day there were no kudu—and no water. All round them the sky was hot, blue and menacing. The grass was hard and brittle and crumbled under John's boots, sending up little puffs of yellow-grey dust in the trail behind.

A blazing sun seemed to suck the moisture from his body. Every dried fibre screamed for water as he dragged along. But now the bottle clanked emptily at his side and there was nothing he could do about it.

That night a hot wind soughed over the barren plain. His brain reeled

Near him, lying in the dry grass, Duma made rasping noises in his throat as he lay, his lips bleeding from

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the heat-cracks in the skin. John grated his teeth and tried to swallow.

One fact was plain. They had passed the point of 'no return' now. They had to find water ahead. There was no question of going back. They would never last the distance.

The following morning broke in a vortex of fire, a sea of hot blue flame fed by relentless shafts from the burnished sky. He felt his head swimming. Great swathes of light before his eyes began to give way to snapping blinds of darkness. Twice he lost his balance and staggered off to the left, mumbling to himself.

Then he would feel Duma's hand plucking at his shoulders, guiding him forward.

At times the agony would shut off. But when it returned it was intensified. He rolled his head back on his shoulders, feeling the hot air biting into his throat. He put out a hand and tried to touch Duma. He felt his fingers close over the Zulu's shoulder and he stumbled on.

The sun had passed its zenith when he saw the ant-hill. He blinked his red-rimmed eyes. It looked like a solid chunk of grey jutting from the yellow grass. A ripple of heat shimmered over the plain.

Swaying drunkenly, he stood watching it. Something tapped his arm. His lips parted as he turned his head.

The Zulu was croaking and cackling, trying to make him understand. He kept tapping and pointing at the ant-hill. John wrinkled his face. What was Duma saying?

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The ant-hill began to move and he stared at it. Duma was croaking madly and pointing to the rifle.

It was then that he realised that the grey mound, which he had taken to be an ant-hill, was an elephant!

John shook his head, trying to clear it. The heat shimmered again, obscuring his vision. The elephant swung forward, its spine a hard ridge of bone under a grey, seamed hide.

Duma started running in the jerking, unsteady run of a man mad with thirst. John stumbled and tripped after him. The rifle barrels were blistering hot. He shrugged the pain aside as he forced the hammers back. The sky seemed to shutter about him—light and darkness, light and darkness—as he blundered after the Zulu and the elephant.

Soon he could see the white spiky hairs on the hide and the long dust-encrusted wrinkles running under the hind legs. He gasped, head rolling. Then his foot caught in the grass and he thudded down, half-winded.

The tips of its ears rustled against the grass as the elephant pounded away, head down and trunk swinging. John struggled up and stuck out a foot to steady himself. The head was about twenty yards away. He lifted the rifle. The butt felt hot against his cheek. The sights and muzzle dissolved into a blur against the grey of the hide.

He gritted his teeth and the waves of shock from the explosion thundered through the plain. A gaping hole bored suddenly into the elephant's head, just behind the ear. John held his breath. The muzzles were trembling. Calling up every ounce of will, he lifted them

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again, steadied, and loosed off the second barrel.

The elephant's knees bent. The great head sank and its tusks dug into the dry earth. It knelt for a moment, its body heaving. Then the hind legs crumpled and a long sigh ran noisily from its trunk. The bony spine swung in an arc and the elephant rolled into the grass, sending up a cloud of yellow, dry tinder. The ground trembled.

Chest heaving, John leaned heavily on his rifle. Duma went for the dead beast, knife in one hand, and pack in the other. John limped after him.

The Zulu dragged the tin mugs from his pack. He tugged out a kerchief, put it over the mug then sliced into the elephant's belly.

Then he found what he wanted—water! He slit the white bladder and held a cup covered with a kerchief to it. A shadow fell across the grass as a vulture circled lazily overhead.

"Drink, *Inkosi*. Water."

The stuff in the cup was cloudy. John held his breath and poured the contents down his throat. He kept swallowing. Duma's head went back and his throat worked convulsively.

John felt his body soak up the liquid like blotting paper. His mouth tasted bitter.

"More, *Inkosi*. Drink again. We must carry more liquid. Drink, *Inkosi*."

He shut his eyes as he brought the cup to his lips. He held his breath and swallowed. He counted five cups in all. Duma had his pack on again.

"The elephant must have known, *Inkosi*. He must

Drought

have been heading for water. It will be in his path. Come!"

John slid the ramrod back under the barrels and slung the rifle over his back. He got up and started walking. Feathers rustled near the dead elephant. Three vultures clawed their way across the hide towards the head, their red, naked necks jerking like loathsome scarlet snakes.

John bent under his pack and concentrated on the land ahead. They marched the rest of the day, skirting little hills and pushing through thickets of sun-seared thorn bush. But always keeping the direction which the elephant had been taking. The stars were bright and the moon was up before they slept that night.

Duma smelled the pool next morning. His stride lengthened and it was hard to keep up with him. But John felt fresh strength pour into his legs at the thought of water. He swallowed. His throat still tasted bitter from yesterday.

The pool was scummed over and muddy. Duma scrabbled at it with his hands, loosening the bottom. A film of clear liquid floated up to the surface, and they put their baked lips to it.

Later, Duma filled the water-bottles. They had another drink from these, then filled them again. John pulled a lump of kudu-meat from his pack. It was dried and hard as oak. He put his head in the shade of a rock bordering the pool, and munched at the meat.

The water seeped into his body as he chewed, sending waves of drowsiness through his tortured nerves.

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He swallowed some of the meat, then took another bite. The stuff was tough and salty. His head drooped, the meat slipped from his hand, and he fell asleep.

It was late afternoon when he woke. Duma pulled at his shoulder again. He stared up and blinked. "What is it?"

Duma jerked his head across the pool. "Look!"

John's eyes snapped open and he shot bolt-upright.

Across the pool sat a group of five figures, motionless and impassive, who stared steadily back at him.

They all wore skins slung about their middles. One had a leopard-skin over his shoulders as well. Their hair was a crisp yellow. It was bleached and twisted into ringlets that hung like straw hats about their heads. Long-shafted spears, butts on the ground, rested against their shoulders, and in front of them was a heap of gourds—dried, yellow calabashes.

John glanced sideways at Duma: "Swazis?"

The Zulu nodded. "And look at their bodies, *Inkosi*. See how thin they are."

"Have you spoken to them? Can you speak Swazi?"

"A little, *Inkosi*. I have said nothing yet. I have just woken and seen them."

John held up his hand. He forced a smile at the man with the leopard-skin. He looked as if he were the leader.

"I see you," John said. "Do you speak Zulu?"

He thought he saw hostility flash in the leader's eyes for a moment. Then it was gone, replaced by the same impassive look. John picked up his rifle. He stood up and Duma straightened beside him.

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"They have no love for the Zulu, *Inkosi*." Duma said quickly. "They have fought with Chaka many times. I will speak in their language."

He rattled off something. The leader, a tall fellow now he was standing up, answered.

"They are from a kraal three days' distance from here, *Inkosi*."

Duma spoke again. The rest of the Swazis were on their feet now. Duma's tone changed rapidly and they lowered their spears.

"What now, Duma?"

"I told them we come in peace. That I have fled from the tyrant, King Chaka."

The Swazi leader rapped out a few words and Duma grunted a reply.

"What does he say?"

"He says any enemy of Chaka is a friend of theirs."

John expelled his pent-up breath. Seizing the initiative, he walked round the pool and placed his hand on the leopard skin. Out came the leader's hand in reply. The tall Swazi smiled, for the first time. His teeth were white and evenly spaced.

John felt the tension suddenly dissolve. What might have turned into an explosive situation was now friendly.

The Swazis and Duma began a long and animated conversation. John knew better than to interrupt these exchanges. He could guess what they were saying. At home an Englishman took one second in a quick "Good morning." Not so these men of Africa.

Their exchange of greetings could last for five or ten

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minutes, covering the state of their health, the well-being of their families and the condition of their cattle and crops.

He leaned his rifle against a rock and listened. Duma's Swazi was slow. Every now and again he rubbed a hand against a chin and clicked his tongue, a mournful expression on his face.

There came a lull in the conversation and Duma turned.

"He wishes you well, *Inkon*. He is leader of their kraal. This country has had a terrible drought. Haul All crops are withered The cattle die every day. Their people are thin and have little to eat. This is bad for us "

"You mean there is no water ahead?" John felt a cold chill clamp itself round his stomach. Had they come all this way for nothing?"

"So this chief says, *Inkon*," Duma went on. "Far from here, well past his kraal, the land is burnt under the sun. There has been no rain for many moons. Every day a party sets out from his kraal to this spring, so that the rest may drink. There is none left for cattle—only people."

"Then we can't go on?"

"No, *Inkon* "

John narrowed his eyes at the pool. He fought back the waves of bitterness which welled up in him. This was no way to face a set-back! He bit his lips, then tightened his mouth.

"Does he know of the lake, Duma?"

Duma spoke to the Swazi. The leader frowned, then

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scratched in the sand with the point of his spear. Duma translated as he spoke.

"We are here."

The spear-point dug into the earth. It trailed south.

"The lake lies there—four days' march away."

John studied the marks. The crude sand map meant they were north-west of the lake. He pursed his lips when he realised just what the Swazi leader's marks entailed. They would have to go back south of their trail across the plain. They would have to cross the lake, the land of Chaka and the AmaBatna territory, after all.

The way ahead was closed now. Closed by three months of burning sun that had turned an easy fertile plain into a waterless, lifeless desert.

But there was nothing else to do.

He spoke to Duma: "We can't carry water in our bottles for three days. Do you think the Swazis will let us have a gourd for water? With that extra we should be all right."

"I will ask, *Inkosi*."

The chief nodded when Duma had finished, and spoke to one of his men. The Swazi bent and cut the string of gourds with his spear. He held one out to John.

John bowed his thanks. He walked forward and pulled out his long hunting knife. He proffered it hilt-first, to the leader.

"Tell him, Duma, that my thanks go with this gift. He is a true friend."

The tall Swazi smiled his delight and ran his thumb

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over the sharp blade. He made a waving motion with his hand and his men sat down. They produced dry chunks of mealie meal and handed pieces to Duma and John. Duma leaned across and gave them a piece of kudu meat.

John thought hard as he ate. They had better make a start that night. He had wasted three days already in trying to cross this plain. The sooner they got to the lake the better. They would have to chance both the Zulus and the AmaBanas now. They had done it before. They could do it again.

His confidence returned with a full stomach, and by nightfall he felt ready to make a start.

Duma stoppered the water-bottles while John bound the skin cover round the gourd. He pushed these into his pack and strapped it on. He carried his rifle in his hand.

"Ready, Duma?"

The red rays of the setting sun cut long swathes through the grass as John lifted his hand to the Swazi leader and his men. They cried out some words into the night.

"He wishes us a safe journey, *inkosi*. He prays we find our homes in peace."

"Tell them," John answered, "I wish them well. May rain fall soon for them. May their cattle grow fat and their crops prosper!"

Duma shouted and waved his spear.

Then John turned, slung his rifle across his back, and began marching into the darkness.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



So Near the End

THERE was no mistaking the peculiar sweet scent of the lake. Duma smelt it first, early on the morning of the third day. His eyes glowed excitedly.

"You smell that, *Inkosi*? The place of the hippo!"

John wrinkled his nose. To him the air still smelled the same, harsh and dry. But Duma had not been wrong before. Both his hearing and sense of smell were extraordinary.

It was late afternoon before they saw the water-sheen glistening through a tangle of trees. Their water-bottles had been empty since the previous night, and towards mid day John had begun to feel again the old ominous dizziness that came from thirst.

But he had fought it back, telling himself it would

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not be long! He had forced his body forward. Yet the terrible thirst had taken its toll of his lips and throat. The triumphant shout he gave when he finally reached the water sounded more like a hearse croak. He stripped off his equipment and splashed into the shallows after Duma.

Later when he was refreshed, he saw they had come south-west of the spot where they had left the raft. His eyes searched the lake. Yes, there was the great recess of land in front. And, there, on the right, was the spit where the hippopotamus had attacked.

He nudged Duma and pointed. "Remember?"

His companion shook water from his woolly head and grinned. "They seem to be sleeping this time, *Inkosi*."

The raft was still where Duma had hidden it. He bent and stripped off the covering of branches and twigs.

"Our ship, it is safe!"

John dumped his pack on the raft and pushed a sapling under her bow. The raft jerked free from the sand and floated at the end of her mooring line. John clambered aboard and started clearing the deck.

By the time he had finished it was nearly dark. A sound of honking echoed behind the curtain of trees.

"Goose, *Inkosi*! Goose!"

John unstopped the powder-horn and loaded the left barrel of his rifle with shot. The hammer clicked metallicly as he cocked it.

The geese were flying in arrowhead formation, red beaks and legs plain against the darkening sky. The

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foresight slid in front of the third bird on the left hand side and John pressed the trigger.

The echo flapped across the water, to die in the greenery surrounding the lake. A goose jerked and trailed out of formation. Its wings folded and it turned lazy circles in the air as it came whistling down.

The feet caught in the branches of a tree, and Duma had to climb up to get it.

By the time he was back, John had a fire going. The rest of the evening was spent in cooking and eating the bird. After the meal, he tugged at the mooring-line of the raft and stepped aboard. He yawned and lay back on the raft trunks that served as floor-boards.

"Early tomorrow, Duma!" he called.

"Right, *inkosi!*"

He felt tired. Still, there was only four or five days to go now. Then they would be back with the medicines. Then he would see old Michael Somers, and King again—if they were still alive. He pushed the thought from him.

It seemed a thousand years since he had last seen the settlement, and almost as long since that night he had shouted farewell to the Swazis standing silently by the pool. They had marched the whole of the night and slept little the next day. It had been too hot to sleep in daylight.

All the way from the pool to the lake, the plains had looked barren and burnt. When he had asked Duma about rain the big Zulu had shrugged his shoulders. Some years, he had said, the rains came late. Then there was no water. People, animals and trees died. It

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was the way of this country. Life existed from one water-hole to the next.

Next morning they made an early start. The voyage across the lake was uneventful. The big hippopotami were quiet and the crocodiles seemed content to keep to the banks.

Two days later, Duma sprang from the bows and pulled the raft to shore. John threw out the packs. He took one last look back. Then he picked up his rifle. Duma called from the bush.

"This way, *Inkosi!*"

John marvelled at the way his big powerful companion seemed to take everything in his stride. The only incident that had really upset him had been the liberation of those slaves on the coast. Yet, once he had put his hand to that, all had gone well.

John pulled his pack-straps tighter as he strode along. He glanced round. Without Duma at his side, he would not have lasted very long in this savage country! The Zulu had an uncanny knack of finding his way about. The past few days had been easy ones. They seemed almost a happy augury for the future. A few more to go, and with luck they would be home!

He felt excited. Chaka's warriors did not seem as terrible as they had seemed from afar. Even Duma looked perky and confident as he chopped a way through the bush.

Still, John was careful and did not take unnecessary risks. He dared not light a fire in open camp. They made do with cold food. There would be plenty of hot meals once they got back to the settlement. It was

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pointless to attract attention unnecessarily.

In another two nights they reached the great river which, on the outward journey, they had been forced to swim. John stared down at it in the moonlight, unable to believe his eyes.

"Look at it, Duma!" he cried. "Just look at it now!"

The drought must have burned hard into the country. Three months without rain on the highlands had taken its bitter toll. The once wide river was now a mere trickle along a baked, stony bed. The water was muddy and red. It wound sluggishly through the land, the baked bed looking as barren as the craters on the moon.

"This is bad for the country," said Duma slowly. "Never before have I seen the great river so low. The rains are late."

But, thought John, it would save time. Half a day had been spent in crossing this river before. Now it was only a stream. His boots clanked on the stones as he stumbled across. When he finally got to the stream itself, the water was only knee-high.

He scrambled up the far bank, regained his breath, and surveyed the land ahead. The forest sprawling on his left looked cold and haunted on its moonlit march to the sea. A hyena cackled in the distant darkness.

Directly ahead was the plain. A few hills sprouted from it like warts on a hairy forearm. He hunched his pack forward. The night was still young. It might be best to keep to the plain in the darkness, and make ground while the going was good. After all, this was

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Chaka's country. They would have to go carefully. He waved an arm and Duma padded silently beside him as he struck forward.

Dawn was breaking before they decided to call a halt. John's legs were aching, his back tired and his nerves screamed for rest. The deceptive moonlight had seemed to conjure up all sorts of threatening shapes from the half-dark.

"It will be best if we sleep on that small hill, *Inkosi*," said Duma, pointing with his spear. "We can lie in the rocks there all day. Anyone walking here will not climb a hill if it lies in his path. He will go round it. We should be able to sleep unseen."

"All right," returned John. "We've still got some of the goose left." He smiled. "Only a couple more days and we'll be home."

The sun was rising as he elbowed himself a niche in the rocks that topped the little hill. As he made to lie back, Duma called to him.

"Look, *Inkosi*! Do you see it? Over there!"

He straightened and strained his eyes into the distance. In front of the forest a thin brown vein threaded its way through the plain.

"It's the ravine!" he shouted

"Yes, *Inkosi*!" answered Duma excitedly. "And we shall be there tomorrow! Then through the Ama-Batnas and home!"

Home! John swallowed. The little medicine bottles felt hard under his fingers. He pushed them carefully to one side of the pack. They were more precious than gold.

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He stroked the powder-burn on his leg as he lay back. The skin had healed, leaving a little depression in his flesh. He rubbed it. The wound did not hurt now. He eased himself back into the grass.

"*Inkosi?*"

"Yes, Duma?"

"Your land, *Inkosi*. Is it like this? Or like a lot of settlements?"

Like Africa? John, lying on his side, stared into the grass.

"Not like this, Duma," he replied. "They have big settlements in my country."

"And all men wear shoes there?"

"Yes."

"Black, like ours?"

"Some are black—some brown."

"Oh."

Duma did not say any more. John grinned to himself in the grass. The Zulu was very proud of his Portuguese sea boots.

The sun was down by the time he woke. It glowed redly behind the forest and turned the little folds of the country into rivulets of fire. He sat up and rubbed his face. One last dash now and they would be out of Chaka's land. The way to the ravine was straight ahead. They should be able to get there in a night's hard marching.

"Ready, Duma?"

He almost laughed at himself when he realised that he had spoken in a conspiratorial whisper. Duma grinned back in the twilight.

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"Right, *Inkosi*," Duma whispered in reply.

"Then let's move."

He carried his rifle in his hand. Duma led the way down the hillside and into the grass. . .

John kept close to his tall companion. As the night drew on his nerves seemed stretched to their limit. Twice he jumped back and shouted hoarsely as something leaped up in front of him and bounded away into the darkness. His hands trembled on the rifle.

He uncocked the gun as Duma chuckled: "All right, *Inkosi*—just rabbits!"

He blushed to himself as he ploughed along. The forest and the ravine in front of it came steadily nearer. At length Duma stopped and gestured to the right. The way was now pitch black.

"We must turn up here, *Inkosi*. Yonder lies the narrow place of the ravine. We can cross there without trouble."

"Right," answered John. "You lead the way."

They arrived there just before sunrise. A great spike of rock jutted into the ravine and reached almost to the other side. John eyed it dubiously.

"Is it safe enough, do you think? It looks cracked to me."

"It will be all right, *Inkosi*," grunted Duma, cheerfully.

He stepped out on to the rock, took three quick strides and bounded to the other bank. The rock trembled.

John saw this and bit his lip. He had been a fool. He was still carrying the medicines. If he slipped and fell,

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they would go to the bottom with him. He should have given them to Duma. Rifle in hand, he stood for a moment, hesitant.

"Right, *Inkosi*?"

Duma's hoarse shout echoed down the ravine. John tightened the straps of his pack. He held the rifle in front of him to balance his steps. The rock trembled again as he climbed.

He held his breath. For one horrifying moment he thought it was going to crumble. His hand shook as he took a breath and ran forward. His bent knees snapped straight and the black depth shot crazily below. He landed on the bank and felt Duma's hand grip his arm.

His breath seeped slowly between his teeth. A stone broke loose and spun wildly into space. John wiped a hand across his forehead.

"I wouldn't like to do that every day!" he whispered.

He looked back at the ravine and felt a shudder run up his spine. Duma grunted and pushed ahead.

After an hour he turned. "Shall we sleep here, *Inkosi*? This forest is thick. I think we will be safe in here."

"Are you very tired, Duma?"

"No, *Inkosi*. But what about your leg?"

"It's all right now. Let's push on. We can rest at noon and fill our bottles then." He shot a glance at the knobkerrie in Duma's hand. "Reckon you'll have to use that on a rabbit or bird. I can't shoot here."

"Right, *Inkosi*," answered Duma cheerfully.

Soon after midday, they reached the outskirts of the forest and filled their water-bottles. Duma lit a small

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fire in the shelter of the thick bush and cooked a rabbit he had knocked down during the morning. John glanced upwards. There was no danger of their fire being spotted in this forest.

He ate and then lay back. Although he was tired and every part of his body cried out for rest, he could not sleep. Excitement kept bubbling up. He lay under the branches, wondering. The settlement seemed so close.

At last he could stand it no longer.

"Come, Duma!" he cried. "Let's move on. We won't be seen in the long grass out there. What about it?"

The big Zulu looked down dubiously at his booted feet. Then he scratched his head.

"Let's try," encouraged John.

Duma looked up and smiled.

"All right, *Inkosi*. Home soon now!"

They stamped out the fire and pushed cautiously to the trees near the edge of the forest. Some had long gashes in their trunks, and Duma pointed to them.

"See those, *Inkosi*?"

"Rhino?" queried John. "This far down?"

"They will have come this way for water. All the animals from the high country will be here for water!"

John frowned as he pushed his way through the head-high grass.

"Don't your people store water against a time like this?"

"Store water? How, *Inkosi*? In gourds, like the Swazis?"

"No. In big holes scooped in the earth—leading from the river. We call them dams."

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Duma turned his head. "*Inkosi*?" he asked.

"Well, when the rivers dry, the holes would still be full of water. If there were many such holes, no one would go thirsty."

"Oh—ho!" cried Duma. "These holes would keep us in water when the rains came late?"

"Yes. Why not? Dig plenty of them—big ones."

Duma did not reply at once. He marched thoughtfully along.

"Well, Duma?"

"I can see it would save many lives, *Inkosi*. But—"

"But what?"

"Who would dig these holes?"

"All the warriors. They could finish them quickly."

"Oh, no!" replied Duma quickly. "Zulu warriors do not dig holes, *Inkosi*! They hunt and fight. Work is for women. And they have much to do in the fields. They would not have time to dig these holes."

It was nearing evening when the long grass suddenly grew sparse, then flattened out into knee high tufts. John slipped on one of these and stumbled. As he got up he felt Duma's hand close on his forearm. He felt tension in the Zulu's grasp.

"What? What is it . . . ?" he began.

His voice trailed off into white lipped silence.

Not two hundred yards away, head down and munching stolidly, stood a square-jawed rhinoceros. The spear-tipped horn on its nose shone a dull black against the grey of its thick, armour-plated hide as it paced forward, chewing noisily.

He looked round quickly. But the plain was bare.

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"Will he charge?" John brought the rifle forward as he whispered the question.

"Wait, *Inkosi*, I don't—Look! He's seen us!" Duma gasped.

The beast's head was up. The short-sighted eyes blinked and he snorted. He took a few ponderous steps forward, snorted again and stopped. His head swung slowly from side to side as his sensitive nostrils searched for the scent.

Suddenly he swung round and trotted away.

John expelled his breath. "He's going away!"

As he took his thumbs from the hammers of the rifle, the rhinoceros turned again. He pawed at the ground this time, sending little spurts of sand flying under his hooves. He began to trot, knees bent.

His hoof beats drummed on the hard earth as he launched himself into a gallop. John felt a thrill of fear as he cocked his rifle.

"Wait till he puts his head down, *Inkosi*! Then shoot. Hit him anywhere!"

The black horn sank slowly down until it pointed straight along the ground.

John felt the earth trembling under his feet with the thunder of the beast's onslaught. He lifted the foresight at the head. Twenty yards! His brain automatically clicked over the distances. He squeezed the trigger and the rifle bellowed.

He sucked in a breath. A hit! Bright lead glinted where the ball had smashed itself against the hard horn. The rhinoceros looked dazed. He slewed in full cry and slumped down on one knee, his head moving

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slowly from side to side. "Now, *Inkosi*! Quick! While he's down!"

The heavy shoulder bulged as the rhinoceros levered himself up. His right leg straightened. He snorted and shook his head.

John hooked his finger over the second trigger. He planted the sight squarely on the humped shoulder. It shuddered as he fired. He threw the rifle to Duma and jerked out his pistols.

But the second ball took the animal through the back of the neck. It slowly collapsed on its side, and lay panting and snorting in the grass. The stubby, powerful legs kicked for a moment, then flopped.

"He's dead, *Inkosi*! Look, he doesn't move."

Nevertheless, John eyed the beast dubiously as he pushed the pistols back into his belt, and held out his hand for the rifle. He loaded it cautiously as they skirted the dead animal. Flies were already buzzing near the bleeding head.

When the moon came up that evening, Duma gestured to the left.

"There lies the mountain where we slept, *Inkosi*. See how far away it is. We shall be able to pass through here in peace. The AmaBatnas will not come this far south."

John pursed his lips. The mountain looked black and sinister in the moonlight. It was easily ten miles away — if you could judge distance in this deceptive light. He narrowed his eyes. It might be even more.

He prayed that Duma had been right about the Ama-Batnas. He had seemed confident enough. Still, there had been those shots at the rhinoceros—and the tre-

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mendous explosion of the rifle carried for miles. Especially in this still air.

Duma marched purposefully ahead. His lips moved as he sang a quiet song to himself, a marching song. John caught the rhythm and found his legs moving instinctively to the chant.

Duma had probably sung this song many times, marching at the head of his regiment. The deep tones of the vibrant chant conjured up a vision of thirty thousand brown, oiled bodies surging through the long yellow grass of Zululand, stabbing spears flashing in the sunlight, coloured head-dresses waving in the dust.

Later that night they reached a small clump of trees. John cried a halt. "Sleep here, Duma. This looks a sheltered place."

Duma began gathering some dry twigs and sticks.

"No fire," said John. "We'd better not."

"But, *Inkos*, we are nearly past the AmaBatna country now! Tomorrow we will be at the river that runs past the settlement!"

John looked anxiously into the darkness. "No matter. It's no use trusting to too much luck. The spirits have been kind enough these past few days."

He took out his pistols and laid them near his rifle. His pack felt stiff under his head. Duma was sleeping with a spear clasped in his right hand. John stared into the star-clustered sky. The countryside seemed very quiet. Almost ominously so. He frowned to himself. Perhaps it was his imagination. The moon was well down before he fell back, exhausted.

He came drowsily through the dark tunnels of sleep

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into the blinding light of day. He sat up and averted his head. The sun must be shining full on his face. He blinked. The polished spear blade moved and flicked the light away. •

He tried to put a hand to his eyes and a bolt of fear shot through his veins as he felt two arms pinion him. He heard a strangled cry.

Rigid with fear he fought to his feet, feeling the unbelievable details round him etch themselves in his mind. He heaved, and tried desperately to free his arms. It was impossible. Those hands held him like a vice.

Duma was already bound. Inflexible tree ropes dug into the flesh of his chest and arms as he stood, feet together, a few yards away. His head was bent on his chest in defeat.

John's heart hammered against his ribs as he stared around.

This time the AmaBatnas had really made sure. There were more than fifteen of them, with skins about their waists and long hafted spears in their hands. One had the rifle slung over his shoulder and the two pucks in his hand.

John opened his mouth, but then leader, a tall savage with a lion skin draped across his back, barked an order.

John found himself being propelled forward, then lengths of tree rope were twined about his wrists and jerked tight. He bit his lip till the blood ran. His feet stumbled as the AmaBatnas s rode silently, purposefully along.

The path led up the side of a mountain, precipitous

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in places. The ground was strewn with stones and he slipped and blundered as he struggled to keep behind Duma. After two hours the path flattened, then dipped into a large clearing on top of the mountain.

The sun was high by now. It sparkled vividly on the cluster of huts arranged in a circle round an open compound. It looked as if the whole of the AmaBatna tribe were present. There were hundreds of them milling round the circle.

They gave a great yell when they saw the party approach. Some of them ran up and John felt their brown fingers poke through his tattered shirt. Their bodies were dust-encrusted, and smelled.

His captors pushed these inquisitive onlookers impatiently aside with blows from their spear-hafts. The tribe cleared a way. Underfoot, the earth of the compound felt hard.

John stiffened. As the crowd moved aside he saw a sinister looking stake thrusting from the centre of the compound. He was pushed towards it. Two warriors dragged Duma along. They gave him a push towards John. Then they retired into the mass of brown savages thronging the circle.

Duma's face was bleeding and a thick matted patch on his woolly head showed the mark of a cruel blow. His lips worked emotionally as he breathed through his battered mouth.

John screwed up his face. "Duma! Oh, Duma, what happened?"

"Sorry, *Inkosi*. Sorry." The Zulu's voice was low and heart-broken. "I have failed you. The AmaBatnas range

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farther than I thought. They came early in the morning. Now we shall die!"

"Because of their men? Because of the last time?"

Duma nodded in despair. "Yes. Look! Here is their chief, now!"

The chief was tall and magnificently proportioned. His brown skin looked dusty in the sunlight. He wore only a *moochi* round his middle and a leopard's pelt across his back, the empty paws crossed over his chest.

He stopped in the centre of the circle and brandished the huge battle-axe in his right hand. The humming mob fell silent. Their chief began speaking in a deep resonant voice.

Whenever he paused the populace sent up a great yell and John saw hundreds of hands point accusingly.

"What's he say, Duma? Can you understand?"

"We have violated their sacred place. We have killed many of their warriors. We will die by the fire!"

Fire! John felt a trickle of fear creep down his spine and he shut his eyes tightly to force away the vision that rose before him.

"They're going to burn us?"

"I fear so, *Inkon*." Duma's head sank on his chest.

John grated his teeth as three savages burst from the crowd and raced towards them, blazing torches in their hands.

Suddenly, someone yelled. A warrior ran from the crowd and stopped in front of the chief. He shouted excitedly and gestured at the stakes. The men with torches hesitated in full career and looked uncertain. The warrior kept shouting and haranguing the chief and the

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mob. A deep hum rose round the circle as he waved his arms.

Duma's head lifted, his eyebrows contracted. "*Inkosi!* Listen to what that man says."

"What, Duma, what?"

"He says you must not die by fire. He says you have earned a warrior's death!"

Warrior's death! What did he mean? John felt a rush of hope. Who was this man from the crowd?

The men with torches had not moved.

Duma's voice was low with suppressed excitement.

"He says you are a brave one, *Inkosi!* He was hunting and some *umlungu*s captured him. He was taken to a ship. And one night you, *Inkosi!*, set him free. And all the others with him! Duma's voice rose. He was a slave, *Inkosi!* One from the ship!"

John opened his mouth, but Duma commenced speaking again.

"He is asking the people now. Listen! The fire of combat! Listen how they talk among themselves. Some wish for one, some for the other. The chief says we must die now, but hear how they shout for you! 'Warrior's Death! they cry. It must be! The chief must listen to them!'

The tribesmen were howling with excitement now. They waved spears and knobkerries in the air. The lone warrior stood in the centre, opposite the chief, hands swinging loosely at his sides, panting with excitement.

The chief flashed a spiteful, imperious glance at him, and his lips curled as he began to shout. The populace

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hummed their approval. Duma muttered to himself, his eyes wide.

John tried to flex his fingers, but the biting ropes had cut all feeling from them.

"What's he say now, Duma?"

"Madness!" muttered the Zulu. "He talks madness, *Inkosi*! He says the great *Umlungu* will be here today when the sun is high. This *Umlungu* will decide your fate." Duma turned his head. "What *Umlungu* is this, *Inkosi*?"

John stared back. A white man? Here? His brain whirled as he stood in the blazing sun. Was King better? Could he be coming? He felt a surge of hope run through him. All was not lost! There was still a chance!

Maybe King had signed some treaty with these people. That had always been his aim—to be friendly with the tribesmen. He had often said that was the way to ensure peaceful trading for the settlement.

John felt his heart leap. When King came he would not be alone. He would have half the *Elizabeth's* crew with him—armed British sailors. John felt a sob choke his throat. Everything was going to be all right.

The minutes dragged into hours. A loud cry came from the tribe. They were moving, clearing a way for someone. Heads bobbed as several men approached. Men with white faces were striding into the circle.

John's heart somersaulted.

Da Silva swaggered up to the chief. Shackford plodded after him, followed by several porters carrying long black boxes. . . .



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

* * *

The End of the Black Umlungus

THE swarthy Portuguese looked confident as he strode up to the chief, his bearded, sun-burnt face glistening. He shouted at his bearers. They laid the ominous boxes and several familiar-looking barrels at the feet of the chief, then retreated to the crowded ranks of the tribe.

John eyed the barrels unbelievably. Gun-powder!

Shackford stood a little way from da Silva, his head cocked on one side as he listened. Da Silva wore the boots, breeches and shirt of his profession. The fat Secretary had discarded his brown suit for a shirt, which had once been white, and blue trousers. His arm was out of its sling, but still bandaged. Both men seemed excited about something.

The ex-slave walked past the three torch-bearers who

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screened John and Duma from the chief. His shoulders dragged back by the bonds on his wrists, John shambled heavily up to Duma. The slave was speaking quickly to the Zulu, amplifying his words with gestures and facial contortions.

"What's he say, Duma?"

"I asked him about this sacred place—the one we were supposed to have defiled. He says we slept on the treasure of the AmaBatnas."

"Treasure? What treasure?"

"In a deep hole near where we slept lies a great heap of elephant tusks. This is the treasure of the tribe. This is their hope for the future."

"What do you mean?"

"The man, da Silva, and the fat *umlungu* have told the chief that they will give many fire-sticks for these tusks. This will make the chief great in Africa—greater than Chaka! The fire-sticks are in those boxes they have laid before the chief."

The blood drained from John's face as he listened. The boxes did not contain scientific equipment. They contained muskets! Shackford must have planned this for a long time. Then, when he arrived at the settlement, he had met da Silva and the two had worked together.

He clamped his jaws together. Not only was he to die, but first would come the native tribes, then the white men. And who among the native tribes would believe that the white race had not given muskets to the Ama-Batnas so that they could conquer? They would only realise the true import of the situation when the Ama-

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Batnas turned on the settlers, and then it would be too late. War would rage throughout the land.

It all depended on those five boxes, lying in the centre of the circle, in the blazing African sun. . . .

The three torch-carriers in front moved away. The chief barked something and Sha kford and da Silva spun round. John saw amazement, then hate, leap into their eyes as they saw him. Da Silva stood stock-still, staring, but Shackford took a step back and his hand plucked at the hunter's arm.

The Portuguese barked out something at the chief, and the tall native called something in answer. Da Silva strode over the sun-baked earth, his heavy boots kicking into the dust.

The hunter pounced the last three yards. John saw his arm swing and felt a numbing blow hammer into the side of his face. His bound arms robbed him of balance and he fell heavily to the ground.

"You fool!" grated da Silva. "You will not die too quickly, I promise. I will see to that!"

John looked up. His mouth was coarse with grit and his head sang with the force of the blow. "You'd sing a different tune—you Portuguese traitor—if my hands were free!" he shouted.

The hunter yelped in anger and John felt a booted foot thud into his side. He rolled in agony on the earth. By the time he had regained his breath, da Silva was walking back to Shackford and the chief.

John struggled to his knees, hatred a wild force hot now in his veins. His brain cleared, taking in every detail of the situation. He felt himself lifted from behind

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and pulled to his feet. He turned his head. It was the slave.

The AmaBatna muttered something in Zulu. "*He is the great white man, Inkosi,*" called Duma. "*He is the one who promises them power in this land*"

John felt the blood course through him as the last detail fitted into the puzzle he had been set. His lips were dry and the chief was shouting for some men to pick up the boxes and barrels.

One of the warriors, unaccustomed to the unfamiliar barrels, dropped one, which almost fell at Shackford's feet. The fat secretary jumped back as the staves sprung and a trickle of powder spilled on the ground. John finished talking to the slave through Duma's interpretation, and nodded in the direction of the chief. The slave shouted and held up his hand.

The chief turned to him, glowering. The men at the barrels and boxes stopped their efforts to shift them.

The slave's voice was hoarse. In a low tone Duma began translating his words for John's benefit.

"This white man says the bearded one is no true man, O Chief. He says he is a coward, a liar and a cheat. He says that the people have chosen a warrior's death for him. This means that he must choose a man from the tribe to fight. He says he does not wish to fight an Ama-Batna. He has no quarrel with us! He wishes to fight the Blackbeard, with the weapons of the white man!"

A great roar bellied up from the crowd of waiting people. John trembled. Had he judged their temper correctly? Would they take his challenge for insolence, mere bravado—sacrilege, even—towards the Portu-

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guess whom they looked upon as the giver of power?

"This is madness, *Inkosi*. Blackbeard will kill you! If he does not, the other will. Both *umlungus* are black—black-hearted." John saw his mouth and face working with emotion.

He did not reply.

The tribesmen were on their feet now, waving their spears and stamping their feet on the ground. From their throats came a chant. It bellowed as their brown knees came up, and died as their feet hit the ground.

Da Silva was frowning angrily. Froth showed white on Shackford's lips as he expostulated volubly with the Portuguese, his bandaged arm flapping like a duck's wing.

He turned to the chief, but the native had his head on his chest. He shook it, slowly.

"What do they say?" asked John.

"They call for Blackbeard. They say he will slay you with his great firestick. Then the slaughter will commence. I shall be burned, *Inkosi*." John saw a shudder run through Duma's body.

John turned to the slave. He spoke slowly and carefully in the Zulu tongue. "This warrior has not harmed your people. If the Blackbeard kills me, let him go free."

"The people have spoken," grunted the slave. "It is best to leave things as they are. Ay-ieee!"

John bit his lip at this. It showed just how the slave felt. He was a savage like the rest. He had paid his debt for his freedom, now he was enjoying his brief moment of triumph. This would be the only time when he would be able to shout to the tribe like a chief.

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"How can I fight Blackbeard if my hands are tied?" snapped John. "And where is my fire-stick and my magic bag?"

The slave's mouth opened and he nodded his head. He screamed to the populace, now standing expectantly round the circle.

The warriors chanted excitedly. The roar grew to a crescendo and ended in a great shout. John could not tell whether they approved or not.

Suddenly, he felt the raw tree-ropes fall from his wrists. He clenched and unclenched his fists and rubbed his hands together, coaxing the circulation back. Then he braced his shoulders and flexed his arms. He hoped he was making a good showing, but he was far from feeling confident.

"What about him?" He pointed past the slave to where Duma stood, head drooping, not ten yards away.

The slave took his arm. "What does he matter? Soon you will both be dead. Come!"

John shook his arm free of the slave's hand, and stepped back.

"What is this? Is the fight not to be fair? The other white man will help Blackbeard to prepare his fire-stick. I want him to help me." He pointed to Duma.

The slave snarled "Forget him."

John held his breath. The humming droned round the compound. The tribe was eager for the battle.

"Then I don't fight!" he snapped.

The slave's mouth dropped.

"If I am not to be helped as I wish, then I will not fight. And your friends there," John gestured to the

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tribesmen, "are waiting." He nodded towards them.

The slave shot him an angry look and turned to Duma. The blade of his spear flashed in the light. He left Duma standing with John, then came back with a pack and the rifle.

The slave led the way to the end of the compound. John let him get several yards ahead and spoke quietly and rapidly to Duma. His hand went swiftly to his pocket as he walked.

John stopped in front of the two white men and the chief. He stared fixedly at Shackford as the chief spoke rapidly and pointed to the end of the compound. It was about a hundred yards across.

He glanced at it, then switched his gaze back to Shackford. The secretary was mumbling to himself, and da Silva had the ramrod of his musket in his hand.

John could feel all the attention riveted on him. The boxes and barrels had been forgotten in this new excitement.

"You interfering fool!" mouthed Shackford. "How did you——"

"How did I get back? You wanted me killed, Shackford. Was that it? That's why you sent me for the medicines. It was all a hoax!"

"Of course, fool!" broke in da Silva. "There was no attack. But you 'ad seen the guns. You might 'ave talked. Now you 'ave seen them and now you will die!"

So that was it. John's heart thumped in his chest. They thought he had seen the contents of the boxes that night he had gone to tell Shackford that King wanted him. Then da Silva had invented the attack so that he

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would be sent to get more medicines. What did they care for the sick men?

"You renegade swine!" bit out John. "You'll hang for this!"

Shackford's fists clenched convulsively. "You be . . ." he began.

"Leave 'eem," grinned da Silva. "'E want fight don't 'e? A duel, eh? 'E 'aven't moch longer now. Not moch longer. . . ." The Portuguese slapped the barrel of his musket.

Shackford's eyes followed his hand and suddenly leaped with fear.

"Wait! He's got that rifle King gave him. He's got a better chance than you with that gun. I've seen it fire. I know." Shackford's lips bubbled. "You should both use muskets. Take one from the box and give it to him. Why take a chance now?"

Da Silva's hand hesitated on the ramrod and his eyes narrowed as he glanced at the long rifle. The breech was thicker than his musket. It would hold more powder and send the ball faster.

Shackford plucked at the hunter's arm. "Go on—give him one."

John stared steadily at the Portuguese.

A strangled snarl issued from the hunter's throat. He spat at John and pushed Shackford from him. "Where's my powder-horn?" he yelled. "I'll show this—this. . . ." His voice grated into silence as he grabbed up the powder-horn and poured an extra measure down the barrel of his musket.

"We'll see, you dog!" he snarled. "We'll see whose

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gun shoots the best today. You'll be the one to die."

John still heard him swearing as he walked away and began to load his rifle.

"You remember everything, Duma?"

"Yes, *Inkosi*. As soon as the people form a line I will be gone. They will not see me. They will be too interested in what is happening."

"Good." John looked skywards and forced a grin. "We're lucky. The day is bright."

Duma choked, and cleared his throat. "I will tell them what you did today."

John slid the ramrod under the barrels and handed the powder-horn to Duma. The tribesmen had formed a lane down which he and da Silva were to fire. The chief stood in the centre, to the right. His spear was raised.

Glancing sideways, John could see his pack, the one containing the medicines, lying near the edge of the now deserted circle.

"May luck go with you, Duma," he said, his voice feeling choked.

Duma placed his big brown hand on his chest. "And with you, *Inkosi*."

He turned and John watched him walk unconcernedly through the tribesmen. A few curious glances followed the tall figure, but John's shout soon brought them back along the line.

"I am ready, da Silva!"

The hunter looked crouched at this distance. His musket glinted as he raised it, his face a bleached white against the black of his beard.

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The chief's spear glinted in the sunshine as he raised it high.

John wound his rifle-strap round his arm, took the strain, and raised the long weapon. Da Silva would not miss at that distance. He could be sure of that. He held his breath to stop his arm trembling, and swallowed hard.

Da Silva was an expert. He could never out-shoot the Portuguese. But this was better than burning to death, and Duma would do his job well.

Da Silva's beard was just above the "V" of his sight and the chief's spear suddenly came down in an arc of light.

John knew he was too late. Those blows in the face and side from da Silva had blunted his reactions. His wrists and fingers were still stiff from his bonds. He had been dazzled by the flashing spear when he should have been taking first pressure. Now his fore-sight was moving and his fore-finger crooked round the trigger, hopelessly.

He knew that if he fired he would miss!

A little mushroom of smoke billowed in front of da Silva. John found himself wondering where the blow would fall. His mouth opened as if to lessen the shock as the explosion of da Silva's musket rolled along the lane of warriors.

The shouts of the AmaBatnas echoed round the mountain and John felt his breath heaving noisily through his lungs. He narrowed his eyes. Something had happened to da Silva's gun! It was lying on the ground! An agonising yell screamed into the heat.

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Da Silva had his hands to his face. He was yelling and stumbling about, mad with pain. Blood trickled between his fingers. Then he threw his hands in the air and pitched forward.

It had happened in seconds. John hesitated, took a few steps and jerked still, horrified. Now he could see what had happened. The musket, over-charged, in the hunter's fury, had exploded in his face. The man lay on his back, scratching with impotent hands at the ground. His back arched, he gave a strangled cry and fell back.

"He's dead! He's dead!" Shackford had surfaced from the deep waters of his trance and was looking madly round him. His fatness wobbled under his grubby white shirt as he yelled and screamed, stretching out his hands towards the dead man in the dust and then pulling them in to his sides. His eyes were wide and staring and he kept rubbing his bandaged hand across his face.

John saw the secretary start and twitch.

"This is your doing, Ross! You killed him. It was you! But you'll not escape justice. I'll be your judge and executioner! I'll see you die for this! I'll see you die!"

John stepped back, amazed. The man was unhinged! Look at him now! Pawing and shouting at the chief, Shackford stumbled round in circles, yelling like a maniac.

He flung out a hand. John saw the fat fingers pointing at him. "Kill him!" shouted Shackford. "Kill him! Kill. . . ."

Blood poured into his face making it a mottled

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purple, as he plodded about in a frantic state.

The chief turned away and averted his face. The natives muttered among themselves and shifted uneasily back. They were scared of madmen. It was something they could not understand. Their spears clinked in the dust as they retreated from the gesticulating figure in their midst.

There was a pistol in Shackford's hand, now. The sun shone on the thick blue barrel and John saw that the hammer was back.

"Then I'll kill him!" Shackford shouted. "I will! Do you hear me, you pack of savages? Frightened of a boy are you! Now the tusks are mine! You hear me, Ross!" The pistol muzzle was up.

"Shackford!"

The voice cracked like a pistol-shot over the red sand of the compound.

"Turn around, Shackford!"

John's heart boomed inside him. Michael Somers! And two men with him!

The secretary whirled at the sound of this new English voice. John saw his head go back. "I told you to stay at the"

"While you were at your devil's work here? No, Shackford, you're coming back with me. Back to be hanged, you traitorous dog!"

Michael Somers's voice roared as he advanced on the secretary, musket held ready, the two men behind him covering his approach.

Shackford looked wildly round. Then he dashed madly into the natives. They broke before him, and

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crouched, frightened, to one side in silence.

He ran straight for the boxes of muskets lying in the middle of the compound. He waved his arms, then crouched behind them, spluttering stupidly.

"They're mine, I tell you, Somers! I paid for them. You'll not have them. They're mine. Good gold I gave for them, you dog! You'll not have. . . ."

Somers started forward, musket levelled.

"Get back!" screamed John. "Michael Somers, for God's sake, get back!"

Somers turned, his face a study of bewilderment.

"John!" he yelled. "What are you. . . ."

"Get back, Michael, and lie down! Hurry! Hurry!"

The trail of powder Duma had laid was fizzling towards the heap of boxes in the compound. John watched it leap along the dust as Somers ran towards him. He reached out and dragged the old hunter down into the dust.

Shackford was still yelling in the compound. His voice vanished in a leap of flame and an ear-splitting explosion rocketed along the ground. John felt the shock-wave engulf him, lock him in a hot breath-taking embrace and roll over him.

Something thudded next to him and several black, stick-like things were tossing in the air.

He reached out a hand. The smashed breech-end of a musket was still hot to the touch.

He got up slowly. A few brown bodies lay still in the dust. Of the tribe there was no sign. They had evidently vanished to the mountain after the explosion. Shack-

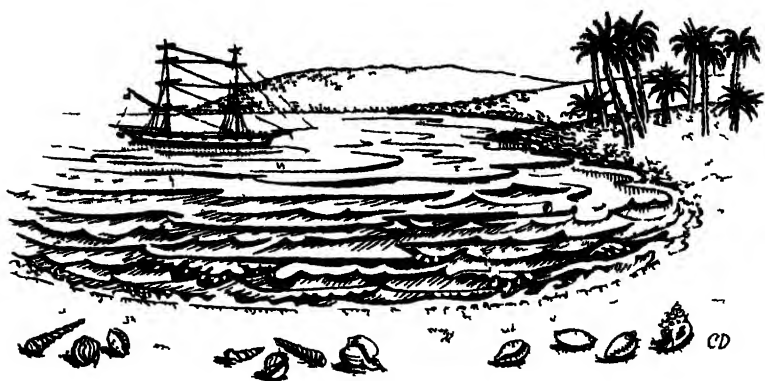
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ford must have been blown to pieces. Where the muskets had been stacked was a low depression, smoke-blackened, in the compound. The air smelled acid and sharp.

John reached down and helped Michael Somers to his feet. He felt the old man lean against him as he regained his breath. Two men came up, unbelieving smiles across their faces.

John grinned back. "Give me a hand!" he called.

Michael Somers waved aside all offers of assistance, saying that there was nothing wrong with him. He was soon well enough to walk alone, so the little party made its way back to the Settlement. The three men plied John with eager questions about his miraculous return, which John answered as best he could, stifling his impatience. His one wish was to get to the Settlement as quickly as possible. He wanted to see Lieutenant King again; to find out if the sick men had recovered; and most of all to tell Duma that his work had been to good purpose—that both the black-hearted *umlungus* were dead.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

* * *

The Answer

THREE weeks later John sat in the hot sunshine of the settlement talking to Lieutenant King. The Lieutenant looked shrunken and white faced after his long bout of the fever and his uniform coat sat loosely about his thin shoulders.

"And then, Ross," he went on, "Duma set off the train of powder with the burning-glass?"

"Yes, sir," replied John. "I'd shown him how to use it during the trip."

King nodded slowly. "He's a good man."

King was silent for a moment. He shifted in his seat and looked out to sea.

"I would never have thought Shackford capable of such. . . Still, I suppose some men will always put their

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personal interests before that of their fellows. Somers recovered a few weeks after you had left. He wanted to go after you but the Secretary forbade it in such strong terms that he aroused Somers' suspicions. The settler followed him after that. That is how he came to be at this place of the AmaBatnas."

John listened as King went on. The scar on his neck was not so noticeable now that he had lost his tan.

"We lost four seamen, Ross. But for you and the medicines we would have lost a lot more. The whole settlement owes you a great debt, and a debt to Duma, as well."

The little *Elizabeth* rode peacefully at anchor in the roadstead. Her fresh paint sparkled in the sunlight. Behind her, the great bluff of Natal rose green and solid from the sea. It looked more than ever like a sleeping beast, a hippopotamus, perhaps, sunning itself in the water.

"I'm staying here, Ross," King jerked out. "Much needs to be done. But the *Elizabeth* sails on the morning tide. Mr. Leverton will have to have some help with his watch-keeping. I'd like you to go with her—as Mate."

John's heart leaped. "Mate, sir?"

King chuckled and colour came into his thin cheeks.

"I want you to take her to Cape Town and thence to London. I've written a letter to the Admiralty which I'd like you to deliver. They will confirm your appointment as Mate in the fleet."

Mate? Was he hearing correctly? John suddenly remembered his manners, and jumped up.

"Thank you very much, sir!"

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"No, sit down, lad. I've a lot to say to you. By the way, that rifle—I'd like you to keep it." He 'chuckled. "You're probably the only one at the settlement who knows how to handle it properly. And another thing . . . after England, what do you say to a stay out here in Africa? We have a lot to do. The ship will be coming back and there will be work ashore and afloat. Don't give me your answer right away. Think it over and let me know by tonight."

John felt his head swimming. Mate! And the rifle! He got up and stumbled out his thanks to Lieutenant King again. Then he walked along the burning sand to his hut.

He thought hard as he walked. Should he come back again? Admirals were made in London, not Port Natal. In England would be opportunity for promotion, money, a fine house. His sister and her husband were there, too. He wanted to see them again.

He thought of the wide plains in the moonlight and the harsh mountains that poked above the horizon, of the animals and the men of Africa. Here was space and adventure. . . .

He stopped as he came to the door of his hut. He could hear voices. Duma must be talking to someone at the back.

"My lord is the greatest of them all. Did I not tell you how he slew the elephants with his great fire-stick, the one with the two pipes? And, hau! When we were in the ship and the cannons roared he stood still as a rock in a storm. Hau! Your lords are as nothing beside him! Over the great leopard mountains we travelled and

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there by a pool he slew the leopard—with his knife! Can your lords do that? And did you hear, when he fought with the black *umlungu*, what happened? He did not have to use his fire-stick. The black *umlungu* killed himself!”

“You may talk,” grunted another voice. “One of the bearers who fled returned and told of the hard march. But your lord will be as the rest. He will stay for a while and then return to his land. Already I hear that he goes on the ship tomorrow.”

“He will be back. He has walked where few men have walked before. He has slain the wild beasts and climbed the mountains and swum the great rivers. This is his land now! He is a man of Africa. He will not leave us for ever.”

John hesitated at the door. The rifle was lying where he had left it, on his grass mattress. He could feel its kick and hear the thunder it made through the long yellow grass.

He turned and began walking quickly back along the beach. His shoes ploughed through the sand and for a moment he thought he could feel the pack-strap dragging his shoulders back.

He would not have to wait until tonight—he would tell the Captain now. . . .